

Time, Time, Time

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by [skeletonofaplant](#)

Summary

“So, what is Poor-gege doing here?”

Lan Jingyi almost smacks into the ground with the way he trips over his feet.

“Uhm—! Excuse me?? Poor!”

“Stop being so clumsy, Poor-gege,” A-Yuan huffs as he impatiently tugs at Jingyi’s hand.

Lan Jingyi relents himself to being dragged again, however not without narrowing his eyes at the little boy.

“Just because I’m not your Rich-gege doesn’t mean I’m poor,” he mumbles under his breath.

A-Yuan gives a shrug and hums noncommittally,

“If Poor-gege says so.”

— — —

Or the juniors travel back in time and meet people they never had a chance to

Notes

I needed more time traveling fics, so i made one

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lan Jingyi looks down at the child attached to his leg and wonders if he should try cutting its head off.

“Rich-gege, rich-gege, rich-gege,” it’s babbling non stop as it clutches and pulls at the ends of Jingyi’s robes.

If this is an illusion created by the spirit, then Lan Jingyi should definitely cut off the kid’s head. Break the illusion. Get back to the night hunt and, more importantly, get back to his friends.

The problem is just... well...

“Rich-gege came back!”

Awkwardly, Lan Jingyi clears his throat,

“I’m not—er, do I look like—”

“Rich-gege has toys?”

Lan Jingyi feels a sigh come from deep within. If this is an illusion, it is a pretty convincing one.

With a reluctant face, he bends down to take a knee in front of the excited boy.

If this is some elaborate trick conjured up by the spirit he had just been fighting, well, the last thing he should be doing is kneeling in front of this suspicious child.

He does it anyway.

“I’m sorry, I’m not your rich-gege,” he informs slowly. Mud from under his knees starts to soak into the fabric of his outer robe.

The boy looks alarmed now that he can see Jingyi’s face and it’s clearly not the one he had expected.

Abruptly, he lets go of the ends of Jingyi’s robes and takes a few steps back.

Lan Jingyi feels himself wince, he hadn’t meant to freak the kid out. But maybe it isn’t a kid? Forget illusions, for all he knows the spirit could’ve hit him hard and right on the head and now he is having a hyper-realistic fever dream.

Just moments ago, Lan Jingyi had been deep in the mountains of Gusu, fighting a spirit alongside Lan Sizhui, Ouyang Zizhen and Jin Ling. One minute he had been rushing at the spirit with his sword raised, the next he had inhaled a face full of resentful energy.

Now he is here.

The mud beneath his knee feels real soaking into his robes. The air that he breathes fills his lungs completely. The boy's face in front of his looks awfully full of emotion.

If this is an illusion, it's a pretty good one.

After a moment's hesitation and a scrutinizing look, the little boy finally opens his mouth to say,

"... It's okay. It's not your fault you're not rich."

It's said with such sincerity, such resigned disappointment, that Lan Jingyi can't help but coo at his little face.

"Awww really? You'll forgive this lowly one for not being your rich-gege?"

As he says it, Lan Jingyi pokes lightly at the boy's side causing giggles to erupt with each gentle push.

"Yes! Yes! I already said it's okay!" The little boy is screeching through his own laughs, and Jingyi can't help the grin that takes over his face as well.

He almost momentarily forgets that he isn't supposed to be wherever this is.

"Alright," Jingyi acquiesces and stops poking at the boy, "well, can this one ask a question then?"

The boy seems to think on this for a second before graciously deeming it okay,

"I suppose that would be okay," he says with a look on his little face that has Lan Jingyi fighting back a grin.

"Do you know where we are right now?"

Lan Jingyi hopes that wherever they may be, it isn't far from Gusu. Whatever kind of curse that spirit had put on him couldn't have transported him too far, right?

"Yea! We're on Luo Bo Mountain. How come gege doesn't know that?"

Radish Mountain? Lan Jingyi has never heard of such a place.

Maybe the spirit really had gotten him good and this is nothing but a fever dream.

Shaking his head of such thoughts, Jingyi decides to keep moving forward,

"Hmm, this gege was just making sure you knew. *I* obviously know where we are."

The look the little boy sends him is a mix between exasperated and suspicious. It is a look that Lan Jingyi gets the feeling has been directed at him before, but he just can't place why it feels familiar.

And speaking of eerily familiar, this mountain looks like a place Lan Jingyi has been to before, and yet...

...what is he missing?

Why can't he place what feels so wrong?

"Okay then little turnip, what should I call you?" Lan Jingyi asks instead of addressing his inner turmoil.

He finally stands up off of his knee as he says this, and brushes off the mud to the best of his ability. All he manages to do is smear the paste onto his fingers.

"They all call me A-Yuan!"

Lan Jingyi quirks a brow,

"Who's they all?" He asks, both amused and hopeful.

The likelihood that they are now talking about adults is a good sign for Jingyi for figuring out how to get back to Gusu.

A-Yuan looks at him as if Jingyi has asked a dumb question, his little face is all scrunched up as if the older boy is being obtuse on purpose,

"My people!" The boy says, a little on the fierce side.

"Ahh, of course. I should've realized," Jingyi tries so, so hard to keep the amusement out of his tone, "Will this young master then be magnanimous enough to show the way towards his people?"

Jingyi watches the little boy's mouth reshape the word 'magnanimous' under his breath. He looks to struggle under the weight of it. Jingyi waits with a crooked smile on his lips.

"Hmm... I guess I can introduce you to them..."

Lan Jingyi bows low and proper, arms folded out in front of him,

"Thanking this young master for his eternal generosity," he says smirking.

A-Yuan absolutely delights in this, a big smile splits his face, and it looks as if *he's* struggling to tamp it down now as well,

"No problem!" He's basically bouncing on his toes as he turns around and grabs Lan Jingyi's hand to lead him.

As he's getting dragged along, Lan Jingyi gets barely a second to even think before A-Yuan is once again opening his mouth and saying,

"So, what is Poor-gege doing here?"

Lan Jingyi almost smacks into the ground with the way he trips over his feet.

"Uhm—! Excuse me?? Poor!"

"Stop being so clumsy, Poor-gege," A-Yuan huffs as he impatiently tugs at Jingyi's hand.

Lan Jingyi relents himself to being dragged again, however not without narrowing his eyes at the little boy.

"Just because I'm not your Rich-gege doesn't mean I'm poor," he mumbles under his breath.

A-Yuan gives a shrug and hums noncommittally,

"If Poor-gege says so."

Lan Jingyi sighs displeased and keeps eyeing the kid, but eventually he relents,

"What am I doing here, you ask? Well, this super bad ass cultivator-gege was fighting a spirit with his friends."

"A spirit on Luo Bo Mountain?" The boy asks, curious.

"No, no, that's the thing. We weren't on Luo Bo Mountain..."

With the hand that's not being held by the little boy, Jingyi scratches lightly at his head in confusion, "We were investigating a different forest because it was said people were going missing and then reappearing weeks later far, far away from the original forest."

"Uh-huh?" A-Yuan says, struggling a little to keep up with the story.

"All of them, the victims I mean, would come back recounting crazy stories, talking about meeting their dead grandpa they had never had the chance to meet before."

"My grandpa's alive!" A-Yuan chimes in helpfully.

"And obviously they were crazy..." Jingyi is now mumbling more to himself than to A-Yuan, "And there's no way that could've happened, however, now I find myself transported presumably far, far away from where I first started. None of my friends are in sight..."

He trails off lost in thought.

A-Yuan tilts a curious head in his direction.

Suddenly, Jingyi bursts out,

"So then where's my dead grandpa, huh!"

A-Yuan jumps lightly.

“If this isn’t an illusion and the spirit really did send me far, far away, then why did everyone come back with crazy stories?”

“Should I be preparing to go crazy any minute now, or is this just an elaborate fever dream?”

After another pause Jingyi adds on,

“Or an elaborate illusion, can’t forget that option...” he mumbles.

A-Yuan is blinking up at him as they’ve stopped walking to accommodate Jingyi’s thinking.

“Well,” the little boy says when it appears Jingyi is done talking out loud, “I already think poor-gege is crazy!”

He says this with a beaming smile, as if this is good news that is supposed to help Jingyi narrow down his options somehow.

Lan Jingyi blinks down at the boy for a few seconds before erupting into loud laughter.

“Thank you, A-Yuan, thank you.”

The boy doesn’t seem to understand what’s so funny, but he laughs along with Jingyi anyway.

After a few pats to his head, Jingyi sighs,

“... thanks little one, that really helps.”

He’s still smiling lightly as he says it, and Lan Jingyi decides that for now he will set his confusion to the side. Whatever happened to him, wherever he is now, the only course of action is to keep moving forward.

Taking a step forward to show A-Yuan they should continue on their path, Jingyi cuts an eye over towards the small boy,

“So, how many people do you have?”

It would be good to prepare himself for whatever Jingyi is about to walk into.

Should he be ready to meet a doting set of parents? Perhaps some siblings will be involved?

A-Yuan puts on a face that reveals deep concentration,

“Hmmmmmm...” He says with his eyebrows all scrunched together,

“Maybe... one hundred!” The boy boasts, finally landing on a suitable number.

One hundred!?

Jingyi is well aware that children have a tendency to exaggerate, especially children who haven't learned their numbers perfectly yet. But one hundred?? Is A-Yuan referring to the whole village he lives in?

“Oh..? Is that so?” Lan Jingyi tries to keep the disbelief out of his tone. He struggles immensely.

“Mm! Mm!” A-Yuan hums proudly, “There’s granny, and Qing-jiejie, and Xian-gege, and Ning-gege, and fourth Uncle, and—”

And frankly, Lan Jingyi stops paying attention right then.

These nicknames mean nothing to Jingyi, for all he knows these people could be the boy’s imaginary friends.

Occasionally, Lan Jingyi will hum along in agreement as the boy goes down his list of people, but for the most part his brain has gone into auto-mode.

“And sometimes we have rich-gege...”

Lan Jingyi hums a questioning sound at the one familiar nickname,

“Sometimes?” He prompts the little boy, interest piqued slightly.

A-Yuan hums agreeably from up ahead where he pulls Jingyi along by their interconnected hands,

“Rich-gege never stays. He comes with toys and makes Xian-gege smile. But then he leaves. He leaves the toys, and takes Xian-gege’s smile.”

It is said so matter of factly in only the way a child can make something so sad sound so practical.

“Your rich-gege... he’s of the Lan clan?”

A-Yuan tips his head to the side confused,

“Who?”

Lan Jingyi clears his throat,

“I mean, does he wear the robes I wear? Does he have a headband like mine?”

This is the only explanation Jingyi can think of for why he was mistaken for this ‘rich-gege.’

“Yea he does, but you are not rich like him.”

“Hey. Kid. I’m not, like, poor, okay?”

“You don’t bring light like him either.”

The second part A-Yuan seems to have added off-handedly, but it makes Jingyi falter in his steps.

“He brings... light?”

Lan Jingyi knows of only one Lan who has been described this way. Even if A-Yuan’s statement is just a childish misunderstanding of the title, there is still only one Lan who that could be.

A-Yuan hums,

“That’s what Qing-jiejie says!”

To learn that Hanguang-jun has been visiting Luo Bo Mountain is... comforting maybe?

This place must surely exist if Hanguang-jun has been visiting, however... Shouldn’t Lan Jingyi know if Hanguang-jun has been frequenting a mountain? Shouldn’t everyone?

What would he even be doing here? Why does he let strange little boys call him rich-gege and apparently give them toys?

The scales in Jingyi’s mind tip ever so slightly in favor of fever dream now.

Shaking his head as if to shake away his thoughts, Jingyi manages a reply,

“...that’s nice of him.”

And just like that, the boy is falling back into his jibber jabbering. He almost reminds Jingyi of Wei-qianbei in the way that he goes on and on. Gesticulating with his little arms, and lighting up as he’s reminded of new things to say.

Lan Jingyi is content to let the little boy ramble on, leading him to who only knows where and clutching tight to his hand.

There is no apparent direction in which A-Yuan is leading Jingyi, which is mildly concerning for sure. However, there is one certainty—

Wherever they are going, it is definitely deeper into the heart of Luo Bo Mountain.

— — —

Jin Ling has never met someone that he couldn't piss off before. In fact, it seems to come very naturally to him—Being combative and provoking ire in others.

Even Lan Sizhui, delicate as he is, has had to restrain eye rolls and talk through gritted teeth sometimes when Jin Ling says something he doesn't particularly agree with.

This woman now, dressed in modest gold (with purple undertones?) is probably the first person to only ever be nothing but patient with Jin Ling.

“Uh, which spoon were you asking for?” He asks with his eyebrows furrowed.

Jin Ling's question earns only a small smile and a soft hand pointing towards the container holding a bunch of kitchen utensils.

“Do you see that dark brown one, the one with a shallower base?”

Jin Ling nods once, fast and assured as he reaches for it, finally understanding what this woman wants from him.

“Here,” he says dutifully while he hands over the spoon.

His reward is a hand ruffling his hair slightly and a cooed, “Such a well-mannered young man!”

As the patient woman now uses the spoon Jin Ling handed over to stir her soup, she seemingly takes the silence as opportunity to ask a question,

“So, what's a young boy like you doing in these stuffy kitchens, hm?”

And isn't that the question of the hour?

Jin Ling, last he had been aware of, had been night-hunting with his three friends on a mountain in Gusu.

Him, Lan Sizhui, Lan Jingyi and Ouyang Zizhen had been hunting a spirit that was said to have been causing people to disappear for weeks on end, only for the victims to come back crazy and rambling about seeing dead people.

Weird, right, but nothing too strange.

And yet it had taken a turn for the bizarre after Jin Ling inhaled a puff of resentful energy that had sent him...back to Koi Tower?

One minute he had been swinging his sword toward the resentful spirit, the next he was unintentionally threatening the nice workers in a very familiar kitchen with a whisk in place of Suihua.

Somehow, (and don't ask Jin Ling, because he certainly does not know how he ended up here) this had resulted in him playing assistant chef for the last 20 minutes now.

The nice chef lady, unaware of Jin Ling's whirring thoughts, continues on cheerfully,

"You should be out running around with other kids your age, meeting girls, swimming in lakes. Instead, you storm in here with a whisk offering to help cook?"

Unprepared for the additional questions, Jin Ling can only continue his (apparently newly perfected) impression of a stone statue.

It is as if he can only stare and blink, trying to force words but too caught up in his racing thoughts to be successful,

"I, um..."

First of all, all of those activities are more suitable to Lotus Pier, not Koi Tower where fun consists of tying the most gold in your hair and kicking around anyone who fails to do so.

Second of all, even if those were popular activities with the people around Lanling, nobody would ever *dare* goof off around their Sect Leader.

Not knowing how to say this in a way that didn't sound resentful towards *his own sect*, Jin Ling finally opens his mouth and decides to focus on the very first thing the woman had said.

"Stuffy kitchens?" He asks at long last, "You think it is too small in here?"

The woman heaves a sigh that speaks to heavy exhaustion as she dips a finger into the soup and samples her own progress,

"Well, I am new here so maybe I shouldn't complain... However, I am just used to much bigger spaces to cook in."

She's new? Well, that would explain why Jin Ling doesn't recognize her. He had assumed previously it was just because he really doesn't know his staff that well.

Which, for the record, he had been meaning to change!

Of course he had been meaning to get to know the staff around Koi Tower... it was just... well, before the big mess at Guanyin Temple, he had really only been here for half the year anyway, and no one at Koi Tower ever seemed to like him that much.

Wei Wuxian of all people had been the one to inform him that his job as Sect Leader would now entail knowing and understanding his people better than anyone, but he's been busy, okay?

He'd been meaning to get around to it, he just hadn't... gotten around to it.

The woman is once again oblivious to Jin Ling's inner thoughts, and is continuing on before he can get too lost.

“The Jin love ostentatiously decorated halls and grand, open places to show off their wealth, but when it comes to their servant’s quarters? To the places Sect Leader Jin never steps foot in?”

Following this statement she tuts quietly under her breath while shaking her head, “Who could care about servants?”

And *woa* , Jin Ling thinks, *this woman is bold*.

To say such thoughts out loud, let alone to your own Sect Leader’s face? It is unheard of.

If it was anyone else, Jin Ling probably would have been yelling already, never having been someone who takes questions about his decisions well. But now...

Feeling slightly chastised, Jin Ling speaks up awkwardly,

“I...” He clears his throat, “My intention was never, I mean—well, I shouldn’t say that. What I *should* say is—uhm—I-I hear you. I will... try my best to make the necessary changes upon your wise words.”

The woman glances away from her soup to look at the stuttering mess of her Sect Leader.

If she didn’t respect him before, there’s no way this display has helped, Jin Ling thinks a little woefully.

Her gaze softens, however, and unexpectedly she lets out a small laugh,

“Sweetie,” She says with a kind of amused sympathy Jin Ling has never been the recipient of before. Lightly, she taps Jin Ling’s chin until he is no longer making ashamed eye contact with the ground, but is instead looking her in the eye once again.

“What are you supposed to do about it?” She’s saying in between her quiet laughs, “Look at you worrying so much over this. You’re too young for this kind of stuff.”

Jin Ling... isn’t... huh?

“You know, I have two younger brothers and they are just like you. Thinking they can change the world, or thinking they *have* to change the world.

“But, what you don’t realize and what *they* don’t realize is that you shouldn’t waste your youth worrying over the things you can’t change. It’s not your responsibility, and it’s certainly not your fault. The adults need to let kids be kids, and we need to clean up our own messes, okay? Who would I be if I forced children to grow up and fix the things that I have more control over?”

The woman is stirring her soup very lightly now, and she’s looking at it with eyes that would probably mean something if Jin Ling could read emotions well.

Jin Ling blinks once. Blinks twice.

He thinks he feels offended?

Like, yea, sure Jin Ling's young, the youngest Sect Leader in recorded history in fact. However, that doesn't mean he can't, like, try and get things done! He can stand up to his Sect elders... sometimes!

Opening his mouth to protest, Jin Ling finds he's immediately cut off by the woman gesturing a small spoon in his direction. Her previous melancholic expression has been wiped clean off her face,

"But enough serious talk. Here, try this and let me know if it's too salty."

With literally no hesitation, Jin Ling allows the woman to bring the spoon up to his lips. All of his previous indignation slips from his shoulders and out of his mind.

When had he become so okay with being spoon-fed food? Jin Ling has no idea.

All he knows is that if someone else had tried to do this (i.e. His jiujiu, Wei Wuxian, Jingyi, Sizhui, Zizhen, etc.) Jin Ling would never have stood for it. Probably would've said something like *"I'm not a baby, I can feed myself!"*

To the woman, all he says is, "Mm, tastes good."

His response provokes more soft laughs from the woman,

"Silly boy, it's not supposed to be good yet! You flatter me too much."

Her words are a reprimand, but her tone is light and playful.

"I haven't even added anything yet, and this boy is talking about 'it tastes good', aiyah," She's mostly just mumbling to herself, but Jin Ling feels himself blush slightly.

He hadn't been trying to overly flatter the woman when he had said that. Very genuinely the food had been good. Had she not said anything, Jin Ling would have assumed it was done.

"It was good..." He protests weakly, only to receive more delighted laughter in response.

"Ahh, just you wait then. If you think it's good now, you're really about to get your mind blown."

The sentence implies that Jin Ling will be here when the soup is finished and, like, is that a bad idea? Probably. Should Jin Ling stop playing bad assistant chef and get back to his friends? Most definitely. Does Jin Ling care? Not really.

This woman, this moment, this kitchen... Jin Ling doesn't know why, but it feels as if he'll regret it forever if he doesn't stay and try this soup.

Maybe this is the work of the resentful spirit he had been fighting back in Gusu. Perhaps this is why its victims weren't seen for weeks after disappearing. If the resentful spirit is keeping

people missing by sending them to nice, warm kitchens with alluring smells and kind, friendly people, then Jin Ling could understand wanting to stay.

“Yea, okay,” He forces himself to say, a little embarrassed still, “Can’t wait to try it.”

And besides, he’s in Koi Tower—familiar territory. It’s not as if the spirit sent him anywhere far and bizarre like all the other victims had recounted.

He’ll finish helping this woman with her soup, try it, sincerely thank her for her kind company, and then leave. He’ll go back to Gusu, find his friends, slay one resentful spirit, and perhaps share the story of how he got sent back home for a small detour. His friends will find it odd, but eventually they’ll all move on, and when Jin Ling gets back to Koi Tower, after all of that, he will look into how much it might cost to make some renovations.

It can’t be that much to expand the kitchen, and after that he will pay a visit to his staff’s rooms to see if improvements are needed there as well.

Koi Tower is already in need of some new renovations anyway, what would be a few more?

— — —

Lan Sizhui thinks that maybe all small towns kind of look the same.

This is the reasoning he will use in the future for when he will need to explain how he found himself so miserably lost.

All small towns kind of look the same, and the one he had been dropped in the middle of approximately ten minutes ago, is definitely not an exception.

Eleven minutes ago, Lan Sizhui had been in the middle of an intense battle with a resentful spirit haunting Gusu’s mountains. After opening his mouth with every intent to warn his friends *not to inhale any of the resentful energy the spirit might throw at them*, Lan Sizhui immediately and completely did just that.

And then he had found himself in this unnamed town.

Perhaps this is how the spirit has been causing its mass disappearances. Perhaps all it has to do is send its victims to quiet, unassuming towns, all while laughing at the amount of time it will take for the helpless people to find their way out and back home.

Whatever the case, Lan Sizhui’s new goal is only this—Find his way back to Gusu.

This would be an easier goal if only the townspeople here were more friendly and open to talking to cultivators.

“Sir, sorry to bother you, but I was just wondering if—“

The man Lan Sizhui is attempting to flag down only grunts and jerks away from his attention.

“—you could tell me where we are...”

By the end of his question, Lan Sizhui is just trailing off into an unheard whisper, the man already having walked halfway down the road and away from the perceived nuisance.

Lan Sizhui fights hard against a groan of frustration, and closes his eyes to prevent an eye roll from showing.

In his head, Lan Sizhui can almost hear Wei-qianbei’s laughter,

What have I always told you about getting information, my little radish?

Wei-qianbei has always said that people don’t want to talk to cultivators, they want to talk to friends.

How do you make friends in a small town easily?

You find the nearest place selling alcohol.

With his eyes still closed, Lan Sizhui lets out a small disappointed sigh. He should not be seeking out alcohol, he should not be trying to trick the people of this town.

But what he *should* do and what he *needs* to do are not corresponding with each other in this situation. What he *needs* is to get back to his friends, so what he ‘*should do*’ is thrown out the window.

With seemingly no other choice, Lan Sizhui finds himself on the hunt for alcohol for the very first time in his life. Taking his time walking through the unfamiliar streets, Sizhui ponders the merits of omitting this particular search from his future Night Hunt report.

‘Looked for local drinking spots,’ might actually send his Grand Uncle Qiren into an earlier qi deviation.

When Sizhui finally finds a shop that looks promising, he has yet to come to a conclusion. His internal debate, however, comes to a very abrupt stop when he sees two people verbally fighting outside the entrance of his desired destination.

One person appears to be the owner trying his best to throw someone out, the other person is a man dressed in familiar reds and blacks, trying his best to get past the owner.

The familiar color palette gives Sizhui brief pause—is that also a red ribbon in his hair?

“How many times do I have to tell you, I’m not the Yiling Patriarch, okay? I’m just one of his many impersonators!”

The man wearing red and black is practically whining, throwing his hands around and kicking up a storm. Certainly, he *acts* like the Yiling Patriarch.

“I don’t believe you! How am I supposed to tell impersonators apart from the real thing, huh? For all I know, you are Wei Wuxian himself!”

“I’m not! I pinky, pinky promise I’m not! Now, will you please let me in.”

But this man cannot be Wei-qianbei.

For one, Lan Sizhui is well aware that Wei-qianbei is supposed to be with Hanguang-jun in the jingshi, patiently awaiting their return to the Cloud Recesses. But more obvious than that, this man is too tall. His face structure too different, his eyes too round, his voice too deep.

This man looks nothing like Wei-qianbei, and well, Sizhui should know this better than anyone.

And so with that thought in mind, he finds himself stepping forward and in between the two quarreling men.

“Wha—!” The owner startles as he is forced a few steps back.

“Lan—! Oh...”

The impersonator is blinking strangely in his direction, and the sunny smile slips off of his face at the sight of Sizhui.

Lan Sizhui isn’t sure why—there should be no reason for this impersonator to recognize him? But perhaps it is not him the man recognizes, but his robes? His sect?

Whatever the reason, it pales in importance to the reason for his intervention. For now, Sizhui elects to place the issue to the side.

“I’m truly sorry to interrupt, but please allow me to settle your debate.”

With his slight introduction, Sizhui bends into a respectful bow aimed at both the shopkeeper and the impersonator.

“Sir,” He turns to look the shopkeeper in the eyes in what he hopes is a trustful way, “this is not the Yiling Patriarch. I can vouch for that on his behalf.”

Two simultaneous choruses of “*He’s not?*” and “*I’m not?*” follow his claim, and as politely as he can manage, Sizhui shakes his head.

“I have personally met the Yiling Patriarch and I can say with 100% certainty that this man isn’t him.”

“*You have??*” Comes from the impersonator behind Lan Sizhui, but he pays it no mind. His attention is instead completely focused on the shopkeeper who is examining him critically now.

“And why should I trust you? How do I know you’ve met the Yiling Patriarch?”

“Sir, I am of the Lan Cultivation Sect.”

This should, Lan Sizhui thinks, be all that is needed to convince the man. For it is common knowledge how close the Yiling Patriarch is with the Lan Sect. All Lans should be very familiar with the Yiling Patriarch’s face by now.

“That’s right!” The cheerful voice of the impersonator is piping up from behind him.

Suddenly, a red and black clad arm is being thrown over Sizhui’s shoulder, “The Lan Sect has over 3000 rules! Among which is that they are prohibited from lying.”

4000 rules, Sizhui corrects in his head, but the small details aren’t important.

Turning to look at the impersonator who still has his arm thrown over his shoulders, Lan Sizhui finds the man is sending him a blinding smile.

“Is that so...?”

The shopkeeper is looking between the two of them suspiciously.

Lan Sizhui confirms by inclining his head once again,

“Yes, we do not lie.”

The resulting outcome is an intense stare off that feels like it lasts hours, but probably only lasts seconds.

Finally, the shopkeeper grunts but says no more. He only steps back into his store with a relenting hand beckoning them both in. It sounds like he might be mumbling something under his breath, something along the lines of ‘*whatever, I don’t even care anymore,*’ but who could be sure?

Lan Sizhui slowly releases the anxious breath he had been holding. From the doorway, a tense looking young man is apologizing profusely on the shop owner’s behalf,

“We are so sorry for the mix-up, my father means no harm, really! Please allow us to treat you both with a free jug of alcohol to show our sincerest apologies!”

The arm around Sizhui stays in place while the impersonator turns his blinding smile towards the shop owner's son,

“Why, free alcohol! Who could ever turn down such a generous offer? Don’t worry about all that before, it’s water under the bridge now!”

And then the impersonator is steering both himself and Lan Sizhui into the store while unleashing an endless stream of chatter.

“Oh, it happens all the time, don’t worry!” He’s saying over the son’s continued apologies, “I should really stop dressing like this, but it makes so much money when you’re trying to sell talismans!”

Sizhui somehow finds himself seated at a table across from the curious impersonator who is still going on with the shop keeper’s son,

“You wouldn’t believe how effective it can be, but what were you saying about free alcohol?”

And it’s all very reminiscent of the real Yiling Patriarch. The chatting, the alcohol, the smile. It’s terribly uncanny. The only thing that’s not similar is the looks, and this causes Sizhui to feel a sense of cognitive dissonance whenever he sees the impersonator’s face.

Eventually, the owner’s son leaves them alone. He sets one jug of alcohol and two cups on the table. Bows one last time. Then scrambles away to go check on his grumpy father.

Out of politeness, Sizhui finds himself pouring a cup for his companion but leaving his own untouched.

“Ah, right. I forgot that you Lans don’t drink, huh?”

Lan Sizhui opens his mouth, but the stranger is faster,

“Don’t worry, don’t worry, I won’t go about pressuring you. More for me anyway. But I guess I need to thank you for doing this old man a solid, hm? I thought Lans don’t lie, but look at you go! You’re like a natural! So, thank you, oh kind young master.”

Lan Sizhui blinks once, twice, three times.

With each blink he can feel the furrow in his eyebrows deepening.

“Lie? I did not lie?”

The stranger pauses with his freshly poured drink halfway to his mouth,

“You didn’t?”

Lan Sizhui shakes his head bewildered.

“But you said you have seen the Yiling Patriarch?”

Lan Sizhui is nodding now, “Yes, I have.”

“And you said I am not him?”

“Well of course you’re not him?”

The stranger lets out a sound close to a squawk at this and looks even more bewildered,

“Do I not look like him??”

Lan Sizhui feels his confusion double now. Perhaps this man simply believes his impersonation to be top-tier?

“Well... your look is quite close of course but...”

“But...?” The man is prompting.

“But you are much too tall to be the Yiling Patriarch. Not to mention your face is just all wrong.”

“All wrong! *All wrong?* What is that supposed to mean? Have you been looking at those damn posters they keep drawing of him? I’ll have you know his face is renowned for its beauty. Women and men alike weep to see his face. At night I worry myself to sleep thinking about how many people he’s devastated, worried that one day—Why are you laughing?”

And Lan Sizhui is indeed laughing, he really can’t help it. This man, his antics, they feel too familiar.

This man may not be Wei-qianbei, but he certainly acts like him,

“I’m-I’m sorry,” It’s hard to speak in between laughs, but Sizhui is managing, “You just remind me of someone, sorry qianbei.”

The man looks at him appraisingly while Sizhui tries to contain his remaining laughter. After only a moment the other is huffing and saying,

“Aiyah, ‘*qianbei, qianbei,*’ no need for such formalities. You can just call me... Yuandao, for now.”

“Okay, qian— *Yuandao*, this one is Lan Yuan, courtesy Sizhui.”

Yuandao clicks his tongue and downs his drink in one swift move,

“You Lans, still always so formal.”

On some instinct that Lan Sizhui has cultivated after hours of drinking (but not drinking) with Wei-qianbei, Sizhui is reaching forward and already refilling Yuandao’s cup.

“Speaking of,” The man says suddenly, “what is a Lan like you doing in a place like this?”

In an almost sheepish manner, Sizhui rubs at his neck embarrassed,

“Actually, I’ve found myself in a sort of predicament.”

Yuandao hums encouragingly while downing his drink once more.

“Well, I,” Lan Sizhui refills his senior’s cup once more, “I think I’m lost?”

Yuandao's only response is a confused look, so Sizhui is barreling on again,

"I need to find my way back to Gusu, but I just don't know where I am right now. Praying this senior will... enlighten me?"

As he finishes Lan Sizhui is cringing slightly. He knows he must sound stupid, crazy, like a lunatic. Who doesn't know where they are? How could anyone end up in a place without knowing the means in which they did?

However, Yuandao's confused look is shadowed quickly by his loud laughter.

"Oh!" He's saying loudly and laughing at the same volume, "That's all you need?"

Sizhui is smiling sheepishly still.

"A name and some directions? Ahh kid, you really are something odd."

If Sizhui were someone like Jin Ling, he might take offense to this comment. Luckily he is not.

"I thought you might be in some real trouble! Wow, wow, okay!"

It is becoming harder and harder to understand him through his loud laughs, so Sizhui clears his throat quietly,

"If you are done laughing, please."

Sizhui has no doubts that this man will tell him where they are, but after the frankly abysmal success he had gotten from the other people he asked, he is feeling as if getting the answer is of high importance.

Yuandao does calm himself down eventually. Shaking his head and taking now just a sip from his cup, the man lets out a big sigh and mumbles something that sounds vaguely like *'kids these days. So serious.'*

Finally, finally, he looks up and meets his eyes and Sizhui notes with astonishment that they are even gray like Wei-qianbei's are,

"You're in Yiling, kid. Right outside the Burial Mounds."

— — —

Ouyang Zizhen, if asked later, will recount that he much preferred the second night hunt he attended tonight over the first one.

The first one was complicated, confusing, and (when looking at it technically) not actually completed yet.

The second one, however! The second one may not have had his friends, but it did have one badass cultivator to do all of the work in an artfully efficient manner that Ouyang Zizhen thinks will fuel his poems on heroism for weeks to come.

It was quick, entertaining, and easy. Everything a night hunt should be!

When Ouyang Zizhen had first appeared in this dark forest, all alone and suddenly whisked away from his friends, his first instinct had been to panic. However, it wasn't long before a Jin cultivator had stumbled upon his forlorn, lost soul and had taken him under his wing.

"Are you night hunting as well?" He had asked, graciously pretending not to notice the tears on Zizhen's face.

And then, without hesitation, he had offered to allow Zizhen to stick close. Citing there was safety in numbers and that they could figure out where Zizhen's friends had gone after the threat in this forest had been eliminated.

The Jin cultivator is not someone Zizhen has met before, which is surprising because the way he had sliced through the resentful spirit so easily should speak to a high status amongst the Jin.

As soon as the other cultivator had successfully taken down the spirit (with very little help from him, Zizhen can admit that) the forest had immediately gotten lighter. Literally and figuratively. The resentful energy dissipated completely and the birds almost immediately began chirping again.

It was amazing!

It was like watching Hanguang-jun cleanse an area—Straightforward but unyieldingly powerful.

It also revealed that this forest is clearly not the one Zizhen had just been night hunting in with his friends.

Now, in the aftermath of banishing the spirit, Zizhen struggles with how he should be interpreting his current predicament.

Should he tell the Jin cultivator that he believes he hadn't actually started in whatever forest this is? Would the cultivator immediately dismiss him as crazy?

No offense to Jin Ling or anything, but it's not as if the cultivators of Lanling Jin are easy to get along with. In Zizhen's experience, he has never really liked any of them and that feeling is definitely mutual.

Would this Jin cultivator be an exception just as Jin Ling had been?

“The spirit has been eliminated. Are, um, are you alright?”

Now that there is no imminent threat hanging over their heads, the man seems almost... awkward? Zizhen has to hold back a small laugh while the other seemingly struggles to maintain eye contact.

Even still, the Jin cultivator makes the effort to reach a perfunctory arm out and pat Zizhen’s arm in what looks to be an attempt at being reassuring.

Remembering how he had been found crying earlier, Zizhen thinks maybe this man has a justified reason for his current unbalanced attempt at comfort.

“No, no, don’t worry about me! I’m all good, Jin-qianbei!”

“Qianbei—!” The man looks startled at the address, and tilts his head upwards to look away in an embarrassed manner, “You don’t—there is no need to address me that way,” he practically huffs.

Zizhen wants to laugh at how much he is reminded of Jin Ling at that moment.

“But qianbei!” He rebuttals, eyes wide with adoration, “You were so cool fighting that spirit! How could I not look up to you now?”

The older man still looks faintly embarrassed, but with a resigned sigh he seems to let it go.

“Whatever, okay,” He mumbles, before getting back to his original point, “We should find your friends now, yes?”

“...Yea... they might be around here somewhere...”

It’s a truly vague answer, but Zizhen is still conflicted!

The differences between this forest and his original forest are small—almost unnoticeable if you aren’t someone who has an appreciation for nature—but, nonetheless, the differences exist. Zizhen can say with certainty that this is not that same mountainous forest of Gusu he had started in.

Unfortunately, Zizhen’s word is not going to be enough proof.

‘Jin-qianbei, I know that this sounds crazy but I think my friends aren’t actually in this forest?’

‘Yes, yes, I did say earlier that we were all night hunting in a forest together, but you know, somehow I must have ended up very far away and I have no idea how. Please help me?’

Ouyang Zizhen looks at the familiar looking sword sheathed at the Jin cultivators side.

No, he certainly wouldn’t be believed. Not yet.

For now, he thinks his best move is gathering information. So, in the interest of that, Zizhen expertly side steps the topic of his friends with the grace of someone who has hung around Sect Leader Nie *a lot* ,

“Jin-qianbei, you didn’t come with anyone?”

Showcasing that he wants to walk and talk, Zizhen starts to walk back in the direction they had come from as he asks. It doesn’t take long for the Jin cultivator to fall into step with him.

“No,” he says, sounding like Hanguang-jun with an answer as clipped as that one.

It’s okay, Zizhen can wait.

Eventually, the cultivator is speaking up without further prompting.

“The Jin Sect does not prohibit night hunting alone as some Sects choose to do. Not to mention I... don’t have a lot of people to rely on.”

Wrong , Zizhen thinks.

Night hunting by one’s self had been prohibited in the Jin Sect during Jin Guangyao’s era of being Sect Leader. It is a rule that Jin Ling routinely breaks and therefore one of the only Jin rules that Zizhen actually knows.

“Oh,” Zizhen replies instead of saying any of this, his brain is working too fast to think of a better reply.

Cutting a glance over at the other cultivator, Zizhen tries to keep the conversation going,

“But, shouldn’t you bring friends to watch your back during a night hunt?”

The man now throws *him* a side eye, and Zizhen quickly realizes how rude that must have sounded,

“No, no! Not that you aren’t good enough to handle all of *this* ,” he gestures wildly to the forest around them, “by yourself. It’s just—“

Zizhen let’s his hands stop flying all about,

“—It’s just, I don’t know, nice to have people looking out for you. They don’t have to be your friends or anything, but...”

And he’s done talking. Should take a sewing needle to his lips and seal them shut forever with the way he probably just offended this man.

Before Zizhen can spiral into a deeper hole of self-reprimanding, however, the man speaks up,

“I used to have someone like that.”

Zizhen stops shoveling the hole in his mind that he had been digging to bury himself in,

“Oh?”

“Her name was Luo Qingyang. We used to be... friends, I hope.”

Zizhen decides to keep his mouth shut still and wait for the other to continue. He does eventually after about another ten steps forward,

“She left my sect, I don’t know where she is now.”

“Oh.”

“The only other options for companionship are my cousins, but they’re not, uh, perfect. So, I might hunt alone.”

Beneath their feet, a twig snaps weakly.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It is fine.”

And then the two walk in silence for what feels like an eternity.

It provides a brief, welcome reprieve from Zizhen’s embarrassment, and makes space for his thinking.

Luo Qingyang .

That is a name Zizhen has heard in stories. Rarely mentioned for sure, and sometimes she is called MianMian for some reason, but still mentioned.

Breaking his thoughts though, the man speaks up hesitantly,

“Uhm. What about your... friends? Do you enjoy night hunting with them?”

Zizhen immediately perks up at the sort of subject change.

“Oh! Yes, my friends are my favorite people in the world.”

The Jin cultivator hums, sounding amused and signaling Zizhen to continue,

“We’re all from different sects mostly, so all we ever get to do is night hunt together.”

“That sounds nice. Intersect friendships are quite rare.”

Wrong again. It’s all wrong.

Intersect friendships are *not* rare. In fact, between all of the intersect marriages and sworn brotherhoods of the past, intersect friendships are quite common.

Ouyang Zizhen cuts another glance over to the man, and thinks that he should definitely do it. Should definitely say it.

All the signs are pointing in the direction that Zizhen's theory is 100% correct.

First of all, this man seems to be extremely involved with Sect business. For him to act as knowledgeable as he seems, and not recognize Ouyang Zizhen or his aforementioned friends? It feels like that should be impossible.

He doesn't want to brag or anything, but he and his three friends are literally some of the most promising cultivators of their generation. It is truly rare to meet someone who doesn't recognize them from the stories and their descriptions that circulate.

And if one considers that point, the inverse must also be considered—Why does Zizhen have no candidates for who this Jin should be?

Even if he has never met him, he should have a name in mind. There aren't any prominent Jins that Zizhen is not aware of as not only his position as Sect Heir demands he know the current key political players of their time, but also his position as one of Jin Ling's closest friends demands he knows this as well.

It is also important that Zizhen considers the stories recounted by all the victims from his original night hunt. After coming back from disappearances that lasted weeks on end, all of them came back recounting stories of people who were known to have, well, passed away.

But honestly, all of this pales in comparison to the only piece of the puzzle Zizhen needs, the first thing that had clued him into something being very wrong—

—This man's face (and sword, but mostly his face) are uncannily familiar.

That high brow, the regal nose, those eyes that he has most definitely seen before.

What kind of friend would Ouyang Zizhen be if he didn't recognize his own friend's face?

And so, it is with all of this in mind that Zizhen turns toward the Jin cultivator, takes a deep breath, and finally plays his cards,

“Actually, one of my friends is also a Jin.”

“Oh?”

The man is frowning now, probably trying to figure out who it could be.

“What is this boy's name? Perhaps I know of him.”

Ouyang Zizhen stops walking.

“Jin Ling.”

The cultivator freezes up ahead.

Having not realized that his companion had stopped walking and is no longer following him, he is now quite a few paces in front of Zizhen.

Without turning around, but with an extremely stiff back, the Jin croaks out,

“...What did you just say?”

“My friend,” Ouyang Zizhen, feeling more fortified because of this reaction, barrels forward
“Jin Ling, courtesy Rulan.”

Jerkily, Jin Zixuan turns to look at him. When they make eye contact his eyes are wide and horrified.

“Though, he doesn’t really like to use his courtesy name. Rulan. His uncle gave it to him and I think he doesn’t want to give Wei-qianbei the satisfaction.”

“How do you—we, we haven’t told anyone that yet—how do you—you, who are you!”

Jin Zixuan has a hand reaching for his sword’s hilt, but it is shaky and not closing the distance quickly.

Ouyang Zizhen closes his eyes and takes a deep shaky breath.

“Jin-gongzi, I need you to trust me and I need you to know I would never lie about something like this, okay?”

“Who. Are. You.” He is repeating, and this time it’s not a question.

Zizhen opens his eyes to find that Jin Zixuan, *Jin Ling’s father*, has finally gotten his hand wrapped around Suihua’s handle.

How ironic it would be if the man decided to kill him right now with his own friend’s sword.

What an interesting thought that Zizhen wishes to have not had.

“My name is Ouyang Zizhen, and I think I accidentally got stuck in the past.”

Chapter End Notes

LJY: man this is too weird, i must be hallucinating or tripping or both

LSZ & JL: oh wow i have teleported quite far away

OYZ: *takes one look at Jin Zixuan’s face* i’m in the freaking past aren’t i

Also

LJY: unable to recognize his best friend since childhood

LSZ & JL: unable to recognize their own parents

OYZ: able to recognize Jin Ling's dad, no problem

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Things are happpppeninnng

Chapter Notes

Did the chapter count just go up? Uhhhhh

Thank you for y'all's nice comments <3 you're all fantastic

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Jin Zixuan knows that his social skills aren't exactly something to be bragged about.

If you look at their generation like it were a scale, he would like to believe that he falls somewhere below Jiang Cheng, but maybe above Lan Wangji? He knows that this might still be asking for too much benefit in the face of doubt. Even Lan Wangji managed to make friends with Wei Wuxian.

Jin Zixuan can not boast those same numbers. His total number of friends currently rests at a 0, where it has rested ever since Luo Qingyang left the Jin sect.

Late at night however, even that friendship is thrown into the questionable pile. Were they ever really friends? Or was it that she was just serving her young master as a loyal member of the Jin Clan?

Jin Zixuan might never know.

It's something he can easily pretend doesn't bother him. For as much as the other heirs and prominent young people of his generation don't like him, he also does not hold much love for them either. It is easy to act as if having no friends doesn't bother him.

Having no friends means you are less worried about receiving news from a night hunt recently gone wrong. Having no friends means you have more time to dedicate to loving your wife and your future son.

And having no friends means that you also have no one to share the name of your unborn child with.

"Who. Are. You."

This time when he asks, Jin Zixuan makes sure to convey that this is not a question anymore. This is a demand.

The boy he had found in the forest didn't seem like a problem when Jin Zixuan had met him. If anything, he had seemed unassuming. Weak. Naive.

Now, he seems like a threat.

There should be only three other people who know his son's prospective name. His wife and her two brothers.

So how could this boy know that name?

No one else from the Jin Clan, past or present, has ever had that name. He and his wife had searched the records thoroughly.

So how could this boy know that name?

Several steps in front of Jin Zixuan, with his hands held palm up as if to convey a sense of docility, the young boy opens his eyes,

“My name is Ouyang Zizhen—“

The way he says it, slowly and gently, it is as if he is trying to prepare him for a blow.

“—and I think I accidentally got stuck in the past.”

The boy, *Ouyang Zizhen*, is watching his reaction. Bracing for who even knows what he might be expecting Jin Zixuan to do next.

It's too bad that Jin Zixuan is not only friendless, but sometimes he is slow.

Stuck in the past.

What does that even mean?

Stuck in the past what? In the passing mud? Stuck in the past few lakes? How could this boy be stuck anywhere, Jin Zixuan is looking at him walking freely now?

Luckily, Ouyang Zizhen seems to sense his confusion and scrambles to clarify more,

“I think, and hear me out, okay? I think I'm from the future.”

Jin Zixuan physically recoils when he hears that.

“What—!”

“No, not I think, actually. I *know* I am from the future.”

“Why would I—how could I!”

They are both talking over each other. One calm the other horrified. Horrified that Ouyang Zizhen could believe him so gullible? Horrified that it could be true? Jin Zixuan doesn't know which it is.

“Jin-gongzi, please, I know I sound like a lunatic.”

This makes Jin Zixuan snap his mouth shut. Questions silenced and replaced with an incredulous stare that he hopes conveys his current state of mind.

How could I believe your lies?? That is what his stare means.

“I can prove it to you. Probably. At least I hope I can prove it to you.”

“*How*.” Jin Zixuan demands.

Ouyang Zizhen's head snaps up to meet his intense gaze,

“How? Uhm, I could tell you something that nobody else knows about yourself? Maybe? I would just need to think of any stories I might have heard—“

Jin Zixuan unsheathes Suihua in one swift move. He stops only when the blade makes abrupt contact with the other's neck. Ouyang Zizhen's eyes widen in obvious surprise.

“*How*, do you know my son's name, ” He clarifies.

And he's trying to keep it cool, he really is. But his blade is shaking, because his hand is shaking, because his mind is shaking, because this situation is crazy!

There's no way this isn't a ploy or a plot or a scheme somehow, except, except, except.

It's just—

“No one but his uncles knows his name, so how do you know his name!”

Ouyang Zizhen's alarmed eyes slowly shrink back to their normal size. They still dart towards the blade at his neck occasionally, but they are no longer so panicked.

“Jin-gongzi...I know his name because he is my friend. In my time he is already fifteen.

Jin Zixuan presses the sword a little harder against the boy's skin, but Ouyang Zizhen is already barreling forwards,

“I know that Wei Wuxian is the one who gave him the name Rulan, and I know that he, despite naming Jin Ling after his stupid, little crush on Hanguang-jun, is still the better name giver between Madam Jiang's two brothers.”

Zixuan, we can't have A-Cheng naming our child. Listen to the names he gave his dogs...

“Jasmine, Princess and Love. If Sect Leader Jiang named Jin Ling, he would definitely have a lot worse nicknames than just ‘Little Mistress’ right now.”

Jin Zixuan feels the arm holding up his sword drop back down to his side weakly.

“I know that Wei Wuxian didn’t get an invite to yours and Madam Jiang’s wedding, but I know that he *will* get an invite to Jin Ling’s 100 day celebration.”

After he is born, Jiang Yanli had been telling him just a few nights ago, *I want to invite A-Xian to Jin Ling’s 100 days ceremony.*

“But, despite the lack of invitation, I know Wei Wuxian still got to see Jin Ling’s mother in her wedding robes because she made a special trip to Yiling just to show him.”

Suihua clatters to the dirt floor, Jin Zixuan’s grip becoming too loose to hold it up anymore.

“...Jin-gongzi? Need I go on?”

“I—“

Where should he even start?

That was a lot of information just dumped on top of him all at once.

“Wei Wuxian...” he breathes slowly, “has a crush on Lan Wangji?”

Ouyang Zizhen furrows his brow,

“Yea? Isn’t it obvious? In my time they’re married?”

“Obvious... isn’t it obvious...” He repeats, feeling blank.

“It *is* obvious...” Jin Zixuan mumbles to himself.

Suddenly, so many moments, so many comments, so many questions slot into place.

Wei Wuxian is in love with Lan Wangji. It literally explains so much.

“It is *so* obvious!”

Jin Zixuan wants to groan, wants to scream, wants to run straight to A-Li.

Wei Wuxian is so obviously, *stupidly*, in love with the Second Jade of Lan! And the Second Jade of Lan loves him back!

“It all makes so much sense! He-he named our kid after him?”

“...Is that not common knowledge in this time?”

Jin Zixuan doesn’t know what to think. Doesn’t know what to feel.

This kid is from the future? *This kid knows his son?* Jin Ling is fifteen. Jin Ling has friends.

“Uhm, Jin-gongzi, does this mean you believe me finally?”

It's as if he is suddenly snapped back into the present moment.

Right, he thinks, *he should probably apologize to his son's future friend.*

Feeling clumsier than normal, Jin Zixuan fumbles towards the ground for his sword, sheathes it in a complicatedly polite way, and then bows formally while saying,

"I must apologize for my behavior earlier. It was unbecoming of me to threaten you with a sword. Especially someone who is so close to my son in the future."

And now it is as if Ouyang Zizhen is the one scrambling. His hands fly in every direction as he blurts,

"No, no! No problem at all! I totally get it, I wouldn't have believed me either! Please, stand up, really it's okay!"

Jin Zixuan straightens, feeling both better and more lost than ever.

"It's honestly good to know that Jin Ling's father is so protective of him, definitely a plus in your favor!"

The boy is sending him two thumbs up along with a wide grin that make Jin Zixuan feel distantly embarrassed. The adoration pouring off this kid is a lot when directed fully at him.

It's also not where their conversation needs to be going, so Jin Zixuan takes to steering the conversation back to the important bits,

"So, you are from the future. How do we get you back?"

Ouyang Zizhen seems to startle at the reminder. "Oh yea," he mumbles under his breath while his eyebrows furrow.

"Well," He's starting, "I was night hunting with Jin Ling, actually—"

Jin Zixuan once again can't hold back the thrill of joy that zings down his spine knowing that his son will make friends that he night hunts with in the future.

"—and two of our Lan friends. I probably fell victim to the spirit's typical form of attack, because other victims had recounted stories about meeting their long... gone predecessors.

The boy shoots a nervous glance towards Jin Zixuan that he struggles to interpret,

"But the victims always reappear back in our time after a couple of weeks of being missing. So, theoretically, if we do nothing, I'll go back eventually..."

His tone conveys that this is not the outcome the boy is hoping for.

"You cannot wait that long," Jin Zixuan ventures.

Slowly, as if thinking hard, the boy shakes his head,

“No, I can’t. It would be better if I could find a way to return early. Then I could try and eliminate the spirit before more people get trapped in the past. Not to mention, my friends are either still fighting the spirit and need my help, or they have defeated the spirit and are worried about me.”

Jin Zixuan nods once in affirmation. He understands the logic.

“Then I know what we should do.”

Ouyang Zizhen turns hopeful eyes towards him.

“We need to find my wife.”

— — —

Wei Wuxian thinks that this Lan is a little strange.

This is something he has thought from the moment he set eyes on the Lan.

Firstly, a Lan appearing in Yiling—in this little shit village—and not being Lan Zhan? Uhm, kind of rude actually.

Secondly, the first thing he had witnessed this Lan do was *lie*. *Lie for him. The. Yiling. Patriarch.*

Then, when questioned on this later, the Lan presumably either *lied again*, or is just extremely stupid. And say what you will about Lans, but they are not typically stupid. (Not like how the Jins tend to be.)

Other than the lying, however, this boy seems the most perfect example of a Lan that Wei Wuxian has ever encountered. His posture impeccable, his manners on point, his face gentle, his voice kind.

It is not lost on Wei Wuxian—the irony that him being a perfect Lan only adds to the boy’s strangeness. The perfectness juxtaposes jarringly with the strangeness, creating a clash that paints the boy even stranger.

A part of that aforementioned kindness, however, is that this Lan willingly followed the *Yiling Patriarch* into a *tavern*, and is now *politely serving the scourge of the cultivation world* cups of alcohol that he himself refuses to drink.

And what could Wei Wuxian do but be suspicious?

Would anyone *blame* him for thinking the boy had ulterior motives? He was strange, okay!

At first, Wei Wuxian had thought that this might be some new ploy to get him back to Gusu. Perhaps Lan Zhan had figured that this boy would have more success dragging his ass to prison than Hanguang-jun himself could ever have.

Hah ! Wei Wuxian can't help but scoff in his head at the thought, *As if!*

Somehow, (incredulously, perplexingly) Lan Sizhui's story is *still* weirder than Wei Wuxian's 'drag his demonic self back to Gusu' theory.

Which brings Wei Wuxian to the third bizarre aspect of Lan Sizhui—The fact that he claims to not know where he currently is.

And Wei Wuxian cannot stop laughing.

It is half relief, half amusement at this point.

Relief that this boy really, probably isn't here to trap him back to Gusu somehow. Amusement that this baby Lan could get himself so turned around as to end up in a dingy place like this.

"If you are done laughing, please."

The boy is blushing faintly in embarrassment, but he doesn't seem too put out.

Wei Wuxian, taking pity on the boy, downs his drink while shaking his head and adding only a muttered *kids these days*.

"You're in Yiling, kid. Right outside the Burial Mounds."

This news wouldn't be, well, great for most people. Most people spend their lives trying to avoid Yiling and consequently, the Burial Mounds. Wei Wuxian hates that he must be the one to tell this Lan he has ended up in such a scary place, but someone has to be the bad guy he supposes.

"Oh."

Lan Sizhui's delicate fingers that had been tapping gently against his unused cup pause for a moment.

Wei Wuxian hopes the ensuing freak out won't be too much.

"That's not too bad..." The boy mumbles slightly under his breath, and then, "That's actually probably good..."

Wei Wuxian's mouth drops.

"Wha—?"

"Yiling is not the closest place to Gusu," the boy is continuing, completely in his own world currently, "so I must have been teleported quite far..."

Teleported? Wei Wuxian thinks weakly.

Wei Wuxian opens his mouth, but the Lan boy is once again talking to himself, and subsequently rolling over what he had wanted to say.

“My spiritual energy might be affected so it would be unwise to travel to Gusu alone—“

Well, that’s very responsible.

Wei Wuxian opens his mouth again, but, and this has never happened so many times in a row to him, he’s interrupted *again* .

“So, what I should do is wait here and wait for help. Hanguang-jun is familiar with the area —“

“Wait—“ Wei Wuxian feels himself choke a little, “Lan Zh—?”

“If I just use a Jin butterfly messenger, he could be here in hours, but—“

“Kid, stop, pause. Did you say—“

“Of course, I would need to remember Young Mistre—I mean, er, the instructions that Jin —“

“Hey!”

And this time Wei Wuxian reaches his arm out to grab the other’s. Lan Sizhui startles, almost as if he had forgotten there was someone else with him.

“Slow down, kid. You’re moving too fast for this old man to keep up.”

Wei Wuxian tries hard not to think about how Lan Sizhui actually has no obligation to explain anything to him, but still the boy looks chastised for not including him.

“Sorry,” he’s saying, embarrassed but calming down, “You’re right, I should probably explain.”

Wei Wuxian takes his hand back to himself, and barks out a laugh,

“No need to apologize, just thought you might talk your way into a punishment back in Gusu. Isn’t that a rule—No excessive speeches that last over 100 words!”

Lan Sizhui gives a look that clearly shows he does not appreciate the joke, but Wei Wuxian grins brightly anyway.

It feels good to joke about the Gusu Lan rules. Almost feels like a simpler time.

“Okay, okay, I’ll stop butchering your precious rules.”

Lan Sizhui inclines his head with a small smile. An almost amused acceptance of Wei Wuxian’s not-really apology.

“So, you said you teleported here. Tell me about that.”

And the boy does, sufficiently and succinctly. The way he recounts the story almost feels like an official night hunt report document is being read off to him, but he supposes that’s just how Lans tell stories.

“And that’s how I ended up here without knowing where I am.”

“Agghh!” Wei Wuxian groans as he downs another cup all in one gulp, “You Lans have gotta learn how to tell stories with more excitement.”

Lan Sizhui wears that amused smile again,

“Believe it or not, I’ve actually heard that before. Apparently not everyone finds out reports thralling.”

Wei Wuxian snorts out a laugh.

He didn’t know Lans were even *allowed* to joke.

“And your Hanguang-jun? You sound like you trust him a lot?”

It’s probably shameless of him to try and dig information on the Second Jade of Lan out of little Lan babies like this, but what can he say? Wei Wuxian is weak.

“Of course I do,” Lan Sizhui is saying, “he practically raised me.”

If Wei Wuxian had been drinking, he surely would’ve spit the drink out at those words.

“*What?*” He asks, probably a little too squeakishly to have passed as a normal response.

The boy nods earnestly back,

“Actually, in my younger days, I used to call him father.”

Wei Wuxian feels like he could pass out.

But.

“But, Lan Zhan’s not any good with kids?”

It slips out before Wei Wuxian can pull it back in.

Lan Sizhui’s finger pausing is the only sign that he is taken aback by his boldness.

“I—I understand some might think that, but I must disagree.”

He says it coolly, but not unkindly. As if he were correcting, but not fighting.

Wei Wuxian is almost inclined to believe him, if only he had not seen with his very own two eyes the way that Lan Zhan interacted with A-Yuan. Sure he buys him lots of things, and lets

the boy hug his legs, but does that make a good parent?

It's not that he didn't think Lan Zhan couldn't *become* a good father figure, but Wei Wuxian had seen the way he had stood stock still in the middle of that market the day he had first met A-Yuan. That man looked as if he had never even *seen* a child before.

Instead of saying any of this, Wei Wuxian opts to awkwardly cough and try to change the subject,

"Well, it's good that you like him so much. Is he well then? I haven't heard of him in awhile."

The coolish demeanor seems to have left the boy, and he pours out another cup for Wei Wuxian. When he slides it across the table it almost feels like an apology.

"He is quite well, yes. Ever since he got married, I can say I've never seen him happier."

And this time Wei Wuxian *does* spit out his wine. All over the table.

"*Married?*" He chokes out.

Lan Sizhui immediately starts to call for rags, and then turns his concern onto Wei Wuxian.

"Yuandao," he is saying, "is everything alright? Was that really too shocking?"

Wei Wuxian half-heartedly wipes at his mouth.

Married?

Lan Zhan got married?

And nobody told him? To whom could he possibly be married? Who alone could be given such a privilege?

"Wh—" He wants to ask, he really does, but a part of him is begging himself not to. To let ignorance truly be bliss. Forever a masochist, apparently, Wei Wuxian forces the words out,

"Who, um, who did he marry?"

Which lucky (*lucky?*) girl was it?

Lan Sizhui is making quick work with the rag, already half the table is dry. Glancing up from his work, he sends Wei Wuxian a quirked brow.

"You don't know? I thought everyone did by now?"

Not societal rejects who live in the Burial Mounds , he wants to say, but holds back. A great joke, but probably not a good idea to reveal his identity right now.

Lamely, he just shakes his head.

Lan Sizhui considers him for a moment, before turning his attention back to the table and the shrinking puddle of alcohol.

“To Wei Wuxian, of course. The Yiling Patriarch. I thought you would know that, being his impersonator and all.”

Wei Wuxian’s elbow slips, hits the jar of alcohol and sends it crashing to the ground where it splinters into pieces.

“Yuandao!”

Lan Sizhui is now leaning down over him, looking extremely concerned.

“What is going on? Are you okay?”

Wei Wuxian looks up into his concerned eyes, but feels he should be the one who’s concerned.

“Am I okay? Are *you* okay? Did you hit your head during your night hunt or something?”

“Wha—?” Lan Sizhui startles back, but is interrupted.

“What are you two doing back here, huh?”

It’s the owner from earlier, the one who had tried to kick him out for being the Yiling Patriarch. The one they had to painstakingly convince that Wei Wuxian’s just a Yiling Patriarch impersonator.

“*I’m* the Yiling Patriarch, I would know if I married Lan Zhan or not,” Wei Wuxian says to the whole room, because, you know, more important issues than keeping up with appearances going on right now.

“You are!?” The owner is yelling, but Lan Sizhui is quick to put a placating hand on his shoulder.

“No, I can assure you that he’s not. I’ve met the Yiling Patriarch, I am very well acquainted with him.”

“No, no,” Wei Wuxian is shaking his head, because *what*, “*I am* the Yiling Patriarch. That boy is some weird Lan that can somehow lie!” He accuses.

“You are?!” The owner yells, turning to Lan Sizhui now. Somehow he seems as equally betrayed to find this out as he was to find out Wei Wuxian really *is* Wei Wuxian.

“No!” Sizhui is not yelling, but not necessarily being quiet, “I’m not lying, the Yiling Patriarch practically raised me when I was younger, I know what he looks like!”

“Ha!” Wei Wuxian shouts, feeling triumphant, “I thought you said Hanguang-jun practically raised you! It can’t be both. Getting your stories mixed up?”

“I’m telling the truth, I used to call him Xian-gege and he buried me in dirt!”

“Oh and we’re just supposed to believe—“ Wei Wuxian falters.

He doesn’t know at what point he stood up, but he finds that he has. All three of them stand in a face off, breathing heavily and glaring each other down.

How could Lan Sizhui possibly know that? Was it a pure guess? A stroke of luck?

No, that was too random. Too specific.

“Sizhui—“ He starts to speak but is abruptly cut off.

“Both of you, get out!”

Both Wei Wuxian and Lan Sizhui jump hard.

“Wha—?”

“Get out! Get out! Get out!” The man is screaming and as he continues, his face reddens with every second, “I’ve had enough, *‘he is the Yiling Patriarch,’ ‘he’s not the Yiling Patriarch!’* I don’t care anymore! You’re *both* banned!”

Silence falls across the whole tavern.

Everyone, of course, has been watching the spectacle as if it were a play to be watched for entertainment. Now, however, no one in the whole place dares to move a muscle.

The silence is broken when Lan Sizhui moves to bow. The movement causes glass from the broken jug to crack under his shoes.

Wei Wuxian winces.

“We’re truly sorry for the disturbance we’ve caused you and your business. Rest assured we will see ourselves out.”

And then he turns around to look at Wei Wuxian.

Oh , he thinks dumbly, *he wants me to follow.*

And so they leave. Glass crunching underfoot as they make their exit.

When they make it outside of the shop, it is an almost unspoken agreement between the two of them to continue walking in silence together.

It isn’t until they find a bench that they stop to sit.

Side by side, they sit in silence.

And then they both burst out laughing.

“Did you see his face!” Wei Wuxian is yelling, wiping tears from his eyes already, “He got *so* red, oh my god!”

Lan Sizhui is laughing along, letting himself go a little in a way Wei Wuxian has yet to see from the boy.

“*He’s the Yiling Patriarch, ’ He’s not the Yiling Patriarch ,*” Wei Wuxian continues to mock through his laughs, “Oh, that poor man! We must’ve confused the hell out of him.”

Eventually, they both calm down. When they do, they sit in a comfortable silence that settles over them while the sunset paints the world orange.

Cicadas have already started humming to welcome in dusk.

“Hey,” Lan Sizhui breaks the silence, and Wei Wuxian hums to show he’s listening.

“I—I know you might not believe me, but I can say with certainty that you’re not really the Yiling Patriarch. So, why...?”

Lan Sizhui trails off and Wei Wuxian shakes his head.

“I’m telling you kid,”

And to emphasize his point, Wei Wuxian turns to make meaningful eye contact,

“I’m the real deal, okay? I’m not lying.”

Lan Sizhui frowns, looking confused, “But, I’m not lying either?”

Wei Wuxian sighs.

He thinks about what Lan Sizhui had told him about the night hunt that sent him here. Thinks about the way he had said, *I used to call him Xian-gege and he buried me in dirt!*

He thinks about familiar nose shapes and eye shapes, and thinks about how he can see his baby A-Yuan in this seventeen year old looking boy sitting beside him.

“Kid,” He says finally, and Lan Sizhui looks up at him.

The resemblance is almost impossible to unsee now that he’s spotted it.

Wei Wuxian doesn’t know what it all means. Doesn’t know why Lan Sizhui had said he’s married to Hanguang-jun, or why he can’t seem to recognize Wei Wuxian for who he is.

There’s only one thing that he’s certain of, and that is—

“I think, little radish, you may have gotten yourself thrown into the past.”

—that this boy is somehow his A-Yuan.

— — —

Jiang Yanli doesn't usually cook in the kitchens anymore.

Her new position as *Madame Jin* dictates that something so servant-like should be beneath her. She shouldn't concern herself with things that others can do for her, shouldn't work where she doesn't have to.

And Jiang Yanli hates it.

If she were bold enough, she might even go as far as to say she hates being Madame Jin, but that's not exactly true. She loves Zixuan. She loves being his wife, and she loves him being her husband. This is something she would never change.

It's just.

Being Maiden Jiang was a lot more fun than being Madame Jin.

So, when given the opportunity to cook, Jiang Yanli always takes it.

Currently, her excuse is that her husband is on a night hunt, and that he has specially requested her one-of-a-kind soup for when he returns. The Jin elders have never particularly liked any of her reasons for cooking, but this one has always been more acceptable than the others. Perhaps because it feels like she and her husband slot into more perfectly gendered roles when she cooks for him after a long day of work.

It's annoying, but technically, *technically*, Jiang Yanli is winning. Even if the elders don't think so.

The soup is for her husband, yes, but it's also for their staff, for their family, and, on days like today, for random young boys who stumble into the kitchen and decide to help with the process.

It happens a few times, someone volunteering to help cook. Everytime it does, they are sent away with more food than they can carry. Jiang Yanli presumes this is the motivation behind volunteering.

This boy today, however, he's well... different from their normal volunteers.

Embarrassed easily. Too passionate for his little body. Quick to anger, but also quick to settle.

He probably thinks he's good at hiding his inner thoughts, but Jiang Yanli sees right through him. Thinks anyone probably could. This boy wears his heart right on his sleeve, and seems

constantly afraid someone will come and rip it off. Nevertheless, he also seems incapable of not wearing his heart there.

He reminds her of Jiang Cheng.

Not only Jiang Cheng, but also Zixuan. Also Wei Wuxian.

The three would despise being put in a group together, particularly a group based on similarities, however it's true. Those three are more alike than they care to admit. All three are so prideful, so protective. Outspoken, but also scared.

This boy, he's so strange, it is like he is all three packed into one.

Thus, it becomes extremely hard not to dote on him.

Hard not to pinch his cheeks and coo until he becomes too embarrassed to stand it. Hard not to straighten his robes and smooth his hair where it got out of place. Hard not to treat this boy like someone she already knows.

It's a blessing that this boy hasn't had enough of this strange woman fussing over him.

"Here," she hears herself say before consciously deciding to do it, "Try this lotus root."

Hard not to feed the boy until he stops looking so unhealthily skinny (something she can't do for A-Xian right now.)

The boy lets her feed him, always seemingly embarrassed, but never refusing,

"It's... good."

He's very hesitant with his praise after the last incident when she asked for his opinion on the salt levels and he started complimenting as if the soup was finished.

Once again, this lotus root should not be *good*, persay. It is just the raw root, nothing added yet. However, Jiang Yanli only smiles softly and lets herself be amused instead of calling the boy out again.

His astonishment at very mediocre, half-done food leads Jiang Yanli to believe that perhaps he has never really experienced good food in a way that is meaningful.

She hopes she can remedy that today.

"That's good," she says, still with a secretly amused smile, "Would you mind cutting up these roots to the same size and shape?"

She points at the pile of lotus roots on the other counter, and he nods determinedly firm.

Silly boy, taking things so seriously.

With clearly a high-level of care and attention, he starts his task. Carefully measuring out each piece, as if it is important to cut each root individually instead of all at once.

Not for the first time, Jiang Yanli has to hold back a laugh.

Clearing her throat, she hopes conversation will hide her amusement,

“I would do it, but I’m no longer allowed to use knives.”

The boy stops his careful chopping to throw a nervous glance her way,

“What? Why not?”

Jiang Yanli sighs, and rests a gentle hand over her extremely small, blink and you missed it, baby bump,

“When you’re pregnant, *apparently* , you’re not supposed to touch things that might hurt you.”

The boy glances down towards where her hand rests, and the slight surprise on his face tells Jiang Yanli that he definitely hadn’t realized before.

It makes sense, her bump is so small this early in, and she wears so many layers, upon layers of robes. Most people haven’t realized yet that their future leader is currently in progress.

“Swords, knives, even some spoons. Nobody allows me to use them anymore.”

“Well that’s stupid,” the boy huffs out in annoyance, realizes what he’s said, widens his eyes and is quickly correcting, “No! It’s not like it’s not important that you stay safe—it’s just—what I meant was—I, you, I—“

Jiang Yanli, taking pity on the poor boy, cuts him off gently,

“Just that I am not this delicate flower that they make me out to be?”

The boy’s shoulders slump in relief at being understood,

“Yea,” he breathes out, “you’re having a baby, not all the sudden *becoming* a baby.”

This makes Jiang Yanli break out into a delighted laugh.

It’s so childish, so petty sounding, but it is wonderful to hear. To have someone be petty and childish on her behalf, it’s refreshing.

“Yes, thank you. I agree.” She says, smiling wider than she has in awhile.

A comforting silence falls over them like a warm blanket. The boy continues his concentrated, dutiful chopping that is taking way longer than it should have. Jiang Yanli is content to lean back against the counter behind them, and rest a loving hand over her stomach.

“Actually,” she speaks up softly, “this soup is for my future son.”

The boy stops chopping for a beat.

“What? But... I don’t think... it’ll be here, you know, in time.”

Jiang Yanli laughs as she pushes off the counter to stir the content of the pot, ensuring nothing is sticking to the sides.

“I don’t mean *this* batch of soup is for him.”

“Oh.”

“I mean, I’m practicing for him. I want my son to grow up with fond memories of the food I make for him.”

“Is that really so important?”

Jiang Yanli looks over at the boy, stopping her stirring for a moment.

He’s looking down and cutting his roots, almost finished, but now he looks a little sad. A little like he’s been put out.

Jiang Yanli wants to ask, *well don’t you remember your own mother’s cooking fondly?* But it is obvious that this is probably why he is sad.

He might, in fact, *not* remember his own mother’s cooking.

Sensitive to that inkling, Jiang Yanli tries to shrug as nonchalantly as possible,

“Mm, to some people it can be. It is just one fond memory of many, though. Joy can be found elsewhere. In friends, for example. In sunny days, or perhaps in the things left behind.”

The boy remains silent, but his hands are shaking while he tries to continue his chopping.

“But this batch, this one’s for us, okay?” As she says it, Jiang Yanli nudges the boy’s shoulder lightly with her own.

Inhaling deeply, the boy replies back shakily,

“Really?”

“Of course. You didn’t think you’d do all this work and not get any?”

He shrugs kind of lamely, but looks a little bit better now,

“I don’t know,” he mumbles.

And Jiang Yanli can’t help it! She reaches out and ruffles his hair for maybe the fifth time already.

“Such a silly boy!” She’s laughing and now the boy is blushing and looking away in embarrassment rather than sadness which feels like a step forward.

If there’s anything Jiang Yanli has had a lot of practice doing, it’s cheering up angsty little brothers. Extending that skill here is not too difficult.

“Here, the roots are done,” he’s still mumbling in slight embarrassment, but at least now he’s successfully making eye contact.

“Oh, good good,” she says as she takes them from him, “this is the last bit we needed.”

With a practiced hand, Jiang Yanli slides the roots into the soup without making too much of a splash.

“I think some people allow their roots to cook for a while, liking their vegetables soft. But, for me, I like them when they retain their crunch a little bit.”

The boy looks at her quizzically, so she answers his question without him having to ask,

“So, good news! We’re almost done.”

“Oh,” he says and understanding alights his response, “That’s good.”

Jiang Yanli hums, content while she stirs the soup for a couple more frivolous turns before taking the pot off of the stove.

“Would you be a dear and grab a couple of bowls for us?”

The boy does his aggressive nod again, and turns quickly to find some bowls. When he comes back, he’s carrying two bowls that are used only for the Sect Leader’s meals, definitely not for normal people or random servants to be using.

But, she supposes she is not just normal people. She is now *Madame Jin* . Perhaps this boy recognized that, and picked the fanciest bowls he could find.

Technically speaking, the two of them should never be using these for their late afternoon snack...

It is fine , Jiang Yanli thinks, *what the Elders don’t know won’t kill them*.

“Alright,” she’s saying, as she ladles out two generous helpings, “Now this is a favorite amongst my brothers, but I need you to be honest, okay?”

The boy nods along as he watches her slide a bowl towards him.

“This is supposed to be practice, so constructive criticism is welcome. Actually...”

The boy tilts his head. Jiang Yanli smiles softly,

“You’re about the age my son will be when I give him this soup.”

Babies can't eat this soup, it is too heavy and too spicy. However, she figures she can start giving it to Jin Ling at around age six. Around the age she first gave it to A-Cheng and A-Xian.

That doesn't mean she won't also be giving it to Jin Ling at age fifteen (or however old this boy is.) A teenager's opinion can be very valuable in this respect.

"You're young, and a boy, and you will have opinions, so I would like to hear them, okay?"

The boy nods hesitantly, as if the idea of giving any criticisms is not pleasant to him.

Jiang Yanli almost coos and ruffles his hair again, but she reigns that desire back.

"Okay, good. Now, you can go ahead."

She gestures that he should try now, and carefully, the boy pulls his spoon towards his mouth.

He blows the steam emitting from the broth off gently. He places the spoon in his mouth.

Jiang Yanli watches intently, inspecting for any sign, any hint of displeasure. While she is examining his face, that is when she notices the first tear fall.

It's singular and falls abruptly, as if it had no time to well up but only drop down.

It's gone and down the boy's face in the blink of an eye.

Alarmed, Jiang Yanli quickly stands and moves to take the bowl away,

"Are you okay! What's happening? Do you have any allergies? Is it too spicy? What's...?"

She trails off when the hand she had been using to pull the bowl away is stopped. The boy has lightly grabbed her hand, and now he pulls the bowl back towards himself.

"No, it's not..."

He looks shocked himself, but not the alarmed kind that Jiang Yanli herself feels. It looks as though he also cannot believe that he is crying. There's still that single tear track going down his face, his eyes now glossy in a way that speaks to more potential tears.

What on earth is happening?

"I, um, what's the name? Of the soup?"

Jiang Yanli fails to see why this is relevant, but after opening and closing her mouth a few times, she finally gives an answer,

"...It's, uhm, it's not an extravagant name, I just call it Lotus Root and Pork Rib Soup."

The boy closes his eyes, causing two twin tears to fall down his cheeks from each of them.

“...and your son’s name?”

His voice is really shaky now, and Jiang Yanli can’t help but want to reach out and wipe the tears off of his face. She feels like it might be an overstep, but she doesn’t know what else to do.

Not knowing why he wants her son’s name, Jiang Yanli gives it anyway,

“My husband and I picked the name Jin Ling, his dajiu picked his courtesy. Jin Rulan.”

The boy’s eyes are still closed lightly, but they scrunch at the name. As if her words are a physical blow.

“Jin Ling...” He speaks as more tears fall. And then both of his hands are coming up to cup over his face.

“Your son’s name is Jin Ling,” he’s saying and it’s muffled now, and probably spoken through tears that she can’t see, and Jiang Yanli is so, so alarmed she can’t even hide it anymore.

“Sweetie, what’s wrong? Are you okay? What’s happening? Can I...?”

She wants to say *can I please give you a hug?* but she really doesn’t want to misstep right now.

The boy is taking deep breaths, and his hands are still covering his face. Despite this, Jiang Yanli thinks his tears have come to a stop. Or at least he’s trying to make them come to a stop.

“I don’t know what’s happening, but can I... could I give you a hug?”

From under his hands, the boy lets out a renewed sob, and Jiang Yanli’s heart breaks. Taking that response as a yes, she sweeps across the distance between them. As she bundles him into her arms, he almost instinctively turns into her warmth.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” she’s saying as she pets his hair.

His cries are soft, and still baffling, but Jiang Yanli continues anyway.

“You’re okay, everything’s going to be okay.”

And they sit like that for a minute, maybe two. Her smoothing his hair and shushing away his cries, him holding onto her with a grip that’s locked on tight.

Eventually, he does pull back, sniffing and looking (Jiang Yanli notices a little hysterically) embarrassed.

He makes attempts to wipe at his face, but on an instinct that Jiang Yanli has cultivated as an older sister, she bats them away. Replaces them with her own gentle hands and wipes the tears away.

“You’re Madame—Madame Jin?”

His questions ever since trying the soup have made very little sense, but Jiang Yanli is not in a position to start judging them,

“Yes, that’s me.”

The boy looks up at her, as if he were seeing her for the first time.

“I think...” he starts and Jiang Yanli is really concerned for whatever he’s about to say. Wonders what it could possibly be.

“I think your son is gonna really like the soup.”

He’s looking at her, so honest, so earnest. His face still has tear tracks running down both sides, his eyes now rimmed red.

Jiang Yanli can’t help the small, disbelieving laugh that escapes her.

“You’re still thinking about that?” She says through an amused huff.

He nods, wipes at his nose, and says,

“I’m sorry about all that,”

Quickly, Jiang Yanli is shaking her head, telling him not to worry about it. It was baffling, yes, still is frankly. But this boy shouldn’t apologize. Jiang Yanli doesn’t want his reasons, she just wants to comfort him.

“I need to tell you something, Madame Jin.”

Jiang Yanli perks up as the boy seemingly tries to move on from having a breakdown to serious business. In an effort to help him make the transition, her hands slide off of the boys hair and move to straighten out his robes,

“I think,” he’s saying while she smooths out the front of his robes, “I think I’m really lost.”

Lost? She thinks. How lost could he be? He’s a Jin in Koi Tower, finding where he’s supposed to be shouldn’t be too hard. However, not wanting to interrupt, Jiang Yanli only continues to listen,

“My name is,” The boy pauses.

Jiang Yanli listens intently as she smooths out the wrinkles on his robes.

“—is, uhm, Jin Zizhen, and I think I’m stuck fifteen years in the past.”

Wen Yuan is proud to say that he is three years old.

And as a three year old, Wen Yuan thinks that he is definitely old enough to make important decisions.

This is why when he meets Poor-gege in the woods, Wen Yuan *decides* that he can trust his *decision* to trust him.

It's a judgment call based on many important factors—Clothes color, financial capacities, similarities to Rich-gege, etc,—and Wen Yuan is certain that he did a good job.

Qing-jiejie is not as certain.

“A-Yuan!” She practically screams as she snatches him up off the ground and away from Poor-gege. The sudden movement rips his hand apart from Poor-gege's.

Wen Yuan had *just* successfully led Poor-gege all the way back to the edges of his home, and yet almost immediately he's separated from him already.

“ *What are you doing?* Get away from him!”

Poor-gege looks stunned—a look that A-Yuan feels himself mirroring from his new perch in Qing-jiejie's arms.

“Madame, please forgive this—“

Qing-jiejie doesn't let Poor-gege finish.

From somewhere in her sleeves, she manifests a long needle, and holds it out threateningly between them and Poor-gege.

“ *What were you doing with him .*”

There's a distinct way Qing-jiejie speaks, Wen Yuan has noticed, that makes questions no longer questions.

It is like when she asks him where he hid her medicine, or when she asks Xian-gege if he slept through the night. It's not really a question, it's a demand.

Poor-gege seems to be realizing this too now that he's facing it. He stutters and glances around, and Wen Yuan thinks enough is enough.

He made a decision—as he is old enough to do, and he thinks Qing-jiejie should respect that.

“Wait!” He yells, squirming in the tight grip she has on him.

Qing-jiejie grunts at the effort to keep him still,

“A-Yuan, what—?”

“You have to wait!”

Wen Yuan continues to squirm until Qing-jiejie has no choice but to awkwardly lower him towards the ground. She’s still trying to hold her needle out threateningly, and stare Poor-gege down, and be careful with him, and maintain her footing—and it’s probably the awkwardest way Wen Yuan thinks he’s ever been put down.

As soon as his feet touch dirt, he darts to run towards Poor-gege’s feet in an attempt to show her that he trusts him, but Qing-jiejie’s hand snaps out lightning fast and grabs his arm. He’s yanked back to her like a spring from the force of it all.

“Qing-jiejie!” He whines.

He doesn’t know how to say, *can’t you see that I trust him?* in words that don’t sound incredibly petulant, and it is frustrating beyond belief.

He finds he’s only capable of whining her name over and over, and saying things like *wait!* and *don’t!*

Qing-jiejie appears to stop trying to understand him, and settles with one hand holding out her needle and the other holding his hand.

She ignores Wen Yuan from here on out,

“I don’t know what a Lan cultivator is doing here, and I’m sorry we can’t accommodate you any better, but I’m afraid I need to ask you to leave.

Now.”

“No, Qing-jiejie!”

Wen Yuan doesn’t want Poor-gege to leave!

He’s new, and just got here, and nice, and funny, and Wen Yuan doesn’t want him to leave so soon!

Wen Yuan struggles against Qing-jiejie’s grip, and chances a glance up at Poor-gege.

Poor-gege looks properly terrified.

It makes sense, Wen Yuan thinks. Qing-jiejie is scary. Even more so when she’s actively trying to be, but he shouldn’t be *actually* scared. Qing-jiejie would never *actually* hurt someone.

It’s with this in mind that Wen Yuan gathers his courage. Poor-gege is saying something and Qing-jiejie is saying something back, but it’s all background noise to him.

Wen Yuan takes a deep breath, and then bites his Qing-jiejie’s hand.

“A-Yuan!”

She jerks her hand back, but doesn't let go like Wen Yuan had anticipated. He only succeeds in getting unnecessary dragged along with her recoil.

The willpower of Qing-jiejie! he praises in his head.

"A-Yuan! We do not bite," she scolds, sounding disbelieving.

Wen Yuan should apologize, but Wen Yuan doesn't care.

"Let me go! Let me go! Let me go! It's *reeeeeeeeallly* important!"

He emphasizes this all by tugging viciously at where she's still holding him in place.

Qing-jiejie glances at Poor-gege who has now backed away several paces with his hands held high into the air. Qing-jiejie glances back down at Wen Yuan who's still tugging at her like a wild animal caught in a trap.

With a deep sigh that Wen Yuan knows to mean he is about to win, Qing-jiejie finally drops his hand.

"What, A-Yuan, what! *What* is so important?"

Wen Yuan doesn't wait, he runs straight for Poor-gege.

"A-Yuan don't—!"

Qing-jiejie makes to grab him again, but Wen Yuan is already too far away. He throws his arms out wide in an attempt to shield Poor-gege.

"I trust him!" He yells.

Qing-jiejie freezes, one hand outstretched and trying to latch on to him again.

"I found him, and I like him, and I trust him. I'm three years old!"

Qing-jiejie rolls her eyes,

"Exactly, you're three years old. That's not old enough to have critical thinking yet."

She reaches out to snatch him up again, but Wen Yuan evades by hiding behind Poor-gege's legs.

"A-Yuan!" Qing-jiejie gasps.

Poor-gege, for his part, is completely frozen. Top to bottom stiff.

"A-Yuan," Poor-gege says, "Maybe you should go back to your... Qing-jiejie, yea? She might kill me if you don't."

Bravely, Wen Yuan sticks his head out from behind Poor-gege's legs to look at where Qing-jiejie is absolutely furious.

“No!” He responds to Poor-gege, feeling petulant.

Wen Yuan isn’t stupid, he knows *some* things. He’s seen the way Qing-jiejie interacts with Rich-gege, and knows that she can’t afford (for some reason) to offend people who wear fancy robes. She won’t go as far as to tackle Poor-gege just to get him back.

“Xian-gege says I’m three and that I’m old enough to make decisions, and I decided that Poor-gege is good!”

Qing-jiejie yells out a sharp word that Wen Yuan has been told not to repeat before,

“That—that idiot!” She’s still yelling, “I’ll *kill* him. I could kill him! *A-Yuan*,” And now Qing-jiejie is addressing him again, “Your idiot *Xian-gege* only said that so that you would stop asking him to pick clothes out for you! You are not old enough to make decisions, get back here!”

“No! I won’t do it! I want Poor-gege! I want—!”

Very abruptly, Wen Yuan’s feet are no longer on the ground.

From a distance away, he hears Qing-jiejie’s sharp intake of breath, and when he twists his face he sees that he’s on Poor-gege’s eye level.

Poor-gege picked him up.

“What are you—“ Wen Yuan starts to ask, but Poor-gege starts talking to Qing-jiejie.

“Here, madame,” Poor-gege is walking *towards* Qing-jiejie, and holding Wen Yuan outstretched by the armpits, “I really, really don’t want to cause trouble, so here.”

Before Wen Yuan can process what just happened, he’s very suddenly placed into Qing-jiejie’s familiar arms.

What.

Qing-jiejie looks just as stunned, but probably for different, non-suddenly displaced reasons.

Poor-gege takes a few steps back, and folds into an extremely low bow. Arms out and everything.

“I’m sorry to have brought such anxiety to your home, I hope you will accept this one’s sincerest apologies. I have no ulterior motives, and am only a lost soul in need of directions.”

Wen Yuan watches Qing-jiejie blink from his position in her arms. She doesn’t look mad anymore, just surprised.

“Please, I will leave if you only tell me how.”

Poor-gege is still bent low, making intense eye contact with the dirt. Wen Yuan turns to look Qing-jiejie in the eye, begging, *pleading* with her.

Qing-jiejie turns to look at Poor-gege.

Poor-gege does not move a muscle out of his bow.

“*You really...?*” She breathes out, and Wen Yuan thinks that he’s never heard her sound this surprised before.

However, as fast as the moment comes, it disappears just as quickly.

Qing-jiejie shakes her head, stopping whatever she was about to say. Instead, she lets out an extremely put-upon sigh,

“Get up.”

Hesitantly, Poor-gege raises his head. Qing-jiejie glances one last time at Wen Yuan before seemingly making up her mind.

“Fine.”

Poor-gege has raised his head, but has not stood up straight again, and so Qing-jiejie snaps,

“I said get up, there’s no need.”

It’s almost like lightning how fast Poor-gege snaps to attention.

“Follow me. I’ll get you some directions.”

Poor-gege sighs and relaxes his stance, which is apparently too much for Qing-jiejie because she adds coldly,

“If I find out you’re lying, there *will* be hell to pay.”

Poor-gege freezes, but Wen Yuan doesn’t mind any of it. Instead he starts squirming again.

Qing-jiejie huffs, but gently sets him down.

Immediately, he runs for and grabs Poor-gege’s hand again.

“Hurray! Poor-gege’s coming back with us!

“H—hurray!” Poor-gege mimics, sounding a little shaky to Wen Yuan.

“Now you’ll get to meet, Ning-gege, and Xian-gege, and Granny, and Uncle four, and—“

Wen Yuan continues to try and list every single person he knows, but if he’s being honest, it doesn’t really seem like Poor-gege is listening.

Instead, Poor-gege laughs along nervously and never takes his eyes off of Qing-jiejie’s back from where she’s leading them up ahead.

It's okay, however, Wen Yuan doesn't mind. He knows Qing-jiejie is scary, but he also knows there's nobody scarier. He will just have to endeavor to introduce Poor-gege to someone like Ning-gege next.

Ning-gege is the opposite of Qing-jiejie—Not scary in the slightest.

Wen Ning startles when he hears voices coming from outside his little hut.

Despite insisting that he's a corpse and that he doesn't need to sleep or rest, his family had still made sure to build him his own living space.

It was nice of them, Wen Ning thinks, the thought counting more than the gift. He thinks his family had wanted to give him something to remind him of his humanity. So that he could feel like a normal person again, even if it's just by having his own place to not sleep and not eat.

It was nice, yes, if not a little useless.

However, even if his remaining family could be a lively bunch as a group sometimes, usually he didn't hear such exuberant voices coming from outside his personal hut.

So, ever curious, Wen Ning opens his door and peaks outside. Immediately, the voices become a little clearer,

"Your mountain is... quite nice," an unfamiliar voice is saying, to which someone (his sister?) is saying something sarcastic in response. The voices are coming from quite a long distance away, and Wen Ning is almost surprised he can hear them at all.

The source of the noise looks like his sister, A-Yuan, and a... Lan cultivator? (Perhaps Hanguang-jun has returned?) and they are all gathered by a recently used fire pit.

Well, Wen Ning thinks, *it would be quite rude not to say hello.*

When he makes his way towards the group, Wen Ning purposefully makes noise so as to not startle anyone.

Most people he is close to don't startle at his corpse-ness (anymore), however, you can never be too sure. It's not exactly a pleasant experience to have people, *your family* especially, violently flinch away at the mere sight of you.

And so, Wen Ning has picked up a habit of purposefully dragging his feet a little.

Three heads turn to look at him when they hear his shuffling feet, and Wen Ning startles to see that the Lan is not, in fact, Hanguang-jun.

It is someone Wen Ning has never met.

When seeing someone he has never met, Wen Ning knows what to expect.

A shout, maybe a scream. Definitely some scrambling back. If they're a cultivator (like this boy here) they'll probably even pull their sword on him.

It's routine, and it makes sense. Wen Ning wishes he could say he's used to it but...

Bracing himself for the reaction he knows is inevitable, Wen Ning is shocked when the actual opposite happens.

From just one glance at his face, the Lan Cultivator is jumping to his feet in... is that delight?

"Wen-qianbei!" He's yelling, all smiles and wide open arms, "Thank goodness!"

Instead of running, the cultivator rushes towards him, and briefly, irrationally, Wen Ning wonders if *he* should be the one to run away.

"You can't imagine how glad I am to see you!"

Words are pouring out of his mouth at a rapid fire pace, "I've been so lost and confused, you have no idea Wen-qianbei! I was on that night hunt with Sizhui! You remember right? And I don't know, everything was just going so wrong!"

Wen Ning blinks slowly,

"No, no!" The boy is barreling on, "Not that you should be worried about Sizhui, agh! I'm explaining this all wrong!"

"You're supposed to be in Nie territory, right? Helping Sect Leader Nie with a spirit problem he was having? Is that where we are right now? In Qinghe?"

Wen Ning makes hesitant eye contact with his sister who is standing alarmed behind the Lan cultivator. She seems just as shocked by the boy's enthusiasm.

"I'm sorry..." Wen Ning eyes the hopeful look in the youth's eyes.

It's unsettling, kind of, the way that this boy sees all of his fierce corpse-ness, and still looks towards him as if Wen Ning holds all of the answers to life.

"I don't... Do we know each other?"

The boy blinks.

"What?"

Feeling awkward, and off-put,

"You know that I'm, a... *you know* . Right?"

Nobody wants to talk to a fierce corpse and perhaps it is not that this boy simply does not care, but more that he hasn't figured it out yet,

Wen Ning feels that it's only fair to let him know now *what* exactly it is that he's talking to.

The boy tilts his head.

"A what? A fierce corpse? I mean, yea, look at you, you big lean fighting machine. Of course I know?"

Wen Ning blinks.

Abruptly, his sister is suddenly standing on the right side of them.

"A-Ning," she says, with a meaningful look, "meet Lan Jingyi."

When she turns her head to look at Lan Jingyi, the boy looks thoroughly confused,

"Lan Jingyi, meet my brother, Wen Ning."

They're both speaking up and over each other immediately.

"I *know* his name—" "It's very nice to meet you—" "—Wait, *brother*?"

And then they all stare at each other.

Wen Ning can't decide whether he should be looking at the cultivator or at his sister for answers. It seems neither of them know who to look at either.

Slowly, it's the Lan who's speak up first,

"Wen-qianbei doesn't have a sister..."

Lan Jingyi shifts his feet and a twig snaps in the quiet.

"...his sister is dead."

And then complete silence.

Briefly, from all around them, the wind picks up slightly.

Nobody dares to break the delicate silence that has formed.

Until A-Yuan does,

"Like your grandpa!"

Wen Ning double takes to where the boy is clinging onto Lan Jingyi's leg. He hadn't heard the little boy approach, and is a little startled by his sudden appearance.

Lan Jingyi looks a little stunned as well, and Qing-jie has pursed her lips into an extremely thin line.

"What did you say?" Lan Jingyi croaks.

A-Yuan smiles as if what he is saying is super helpful,

“Like the dead grandpa you were supposed to see! You’re seeing a dead sister, that’s just one step away from getting to a dead grandpa.”

Wen Qing suddenly speaks up, uncharacteristically quiet this whole time,

“What is he talking about?”

Lan Jingyi turns to look at her. His eyes are still a little unseeing, a little hazy. Then he turns to look at Wen Ning,

“You don’t recognize me?”

Wen Ning shakes his head.

“And you’re—your name is Wen Qing? You’re Wen-guniang?”

His sister looks more hesitant to answer than he had been, but eventually she nods her head.

Lan Jingyi turns his disbelieving look on to A-Yuan.

Slowly, he kneels into the dirt so that he can look at the boy more closely. Absentmindedly, Wen Ning notes that the boy’s white robed knee is already muddy from having clearly done this action many times before.

Lan Jingyi lightly puts both hands on the little boy’s shoulders. From beside Wen Ning, he sees his sister twitch, but not move forward.

So this boy is trusted enough to touch A-Yuan.

“You’re...” Lan Jingyi starts, seemingly searching for something in the little boy’s face.

Under his breath, it sounds like he might mutter something that sounds like *Sizhui* .

“Guys...” He’s saying loudly now, before Wen Ning can question who exactly Sizhui is.

His sister stiffens like she expects some kind of blow. And yet still she does not reach to grab A-Yuan out from under Lan Jingyi’s grasp. It speaks to a tremendous trust that Wen Ning finds hard to fathom.

They don’t trust cultivators. Especially not with A-Yuan.

Why is this cultivator an exception? It is not as if he is Hanguang-jun?

“Who,” Wen Ning hesitates, not knowing who he should ask this question to.

Lowering his voice, he decides his sister is a better option,

“Who is this boy?”

His sister opens her mouth, but Lan Jingyi beats her to it.

“I am Lan Jingyi. I am of the Lan Cultivation Sect. And I think I’m from your future.”

Chapter End Notes

DELETED SCENE

LJY looking around the Burial Mounds settlement

Thinks, ‘hey this place kinda looks like the Burial Mounds!’

Immediately berates himself for thinking something so rude about someone’s home, and keeps his mouth shut.

—

OYZ, LSZ, LJY’s scenes: lalalalalalalala hehehehehe

JL’s scene: ow

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The kids have some feelings :/

Chapter Notes

I'm gonna need everyone to do me a solid, and stop looking at the estimated chapter number. Each time it grows I feel only shame

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Lan Jingyi would like to go back in time and silencing spell himself five minutes ago.

'Wen Ning's sister is dead.'

God! *Why did he say something so stupid!* Of course they weren't gonna let him just say that and not explain!

"Lan Jingyi ."

And, oh my god, Wei-qianbei was not lying in all of his stories about Wen Qing. The woman is *scary* .

Even more so, he has to assume, when she is trying to get someone to spill information on her future, untimely, and ultimately tragic death.

"I— the timeline, Wen-guniang, I have no idea what telling you will do. I, I am truly sorry, but I don't think I should tell you."

If only he could have kept his stupid mouth shut! Why couldn't he have realized what was happening sooner?

"...My sister is gonna die, and you... can't tell us how?"

If it's hard saying no to terrifying Wen Qing herself, it's incredibly hard to say no to Wen-qianbei.

Wen-qianbei who looks like he would be crying if only his corpse body would allow it.

“It’s—“ Lan Jingyi clicks his tongue frustratedly, “It’s more complicated than that! I don’t even know how we would begin to stop her death. We can’t make her *choose* to *not* go to Koi Tower.”

“So, I die willingly?”

“...”

In his mind, Lan Jingyi is gripping his own shoulders and smacking himself across the face.

“What? No—! Is that what I said? I can’t quite remember—“

“Qing-jiejie is gonna die?”

A-Yuan’s question, somehow, is even more heartbreaking than Wen Ning’s.

“Well...”

“What about Xian-gege! What about Granny! I don’t want my people to die!”

And it feels like someone is carving a sword through Jingyi’s chest.

Lans don’t lie, but Lan Jingyi wants to wrap ~~Sizhui~~ A-Yuan up in his arms, pet his head and tell him, *no, of course your people, your Xian-gege, your granny, your family aren’t gonna die! Who could ever do such a horrible thing!*

But Lans don’t lie, so he can only remain silent.

Wen Qing obviously picks up on this.

“We... all...?”

“I really—“

Lan Jingyi cuts himself off as his voice cracks a little too high. Feeling ashamed, he drops his head to look at the ground,

“—I *shouldn’t* tell you.”

But his silence speaks volumes. Wen Qing and Wen Ning know this.

“A-Yuan?”

The boy looks up at his Qing-jiejie when he hears his own name, however, Wen Qing isn’t calling his name. She’s asking a question.

Even A-Yuan? is what she’s asking.

Lan Jingyi lets out a small smile, and if it’s a little sad, well, he can’t help it. He reaches out lightly to poke at the chubby face that’s turned to look over at Wen Qing.

“A-Yuan,”

Wen Qing and Wen Ning seem to both be collectively holding their breath. Wen Yuan turns innocent, familiar eyes curiously over to the new person addressing him.

“A-Yuan, your Wen-gege is not the only person I recognize. I’m quite well acquainted with you too.”

As he says this, he pokes at A-Yuan’s side in the way he’s learned will guarantee a laugh from the boy. It’s a good way to wipe the frown off the little boy’s face.

“What? Really!” He’s asking, all excited with lit up eyes.

When Lan Jingyi nods, both Wen siblings audibly let out the anxious breath they had been holding.

“Mmhmm!” He’s confirming, smiling at the boy he knows will become his best friend in the future, “I’m very well acquainted with you actually.”

Wen Yuan’s awed look turns suspicious in the blink of an eye. Lan Jingyi is shocked to see it, but A-Yuan is quick to ask his questions before Jingyi can,

“Really?” He says, voice practically dripping with doubt, “Then how come Poor-gege didn’t recognize A-Yuan?”

Now it’s Jingyi’s turn to breathe a sigh of relief. Sizhui, even at the age of three somehow, *ridiculously*, is too smart for his own good.

“Well,” Jingyi says, smiling lightly, “in the future you’re much, much older.”

“Woa! How old? How old? Am I five?”

This startles a laugh out of Jingyi, “Five? No way, much older than that.”

Wen Yuan practically vibrates at this news,

“Older?” He shrieks, as if it is unimaginable to him.

Lan Jingyi hums in amused confirmation, “Oh, for sure. Where I’m from, we’re actually the same age.”

“No way, no way!”

“I’m telling you the truth! We’re even almost the same height.”

Though I’m taller, Jingyi thinks to himself smugly, but decides to keep that to himself.

“Woooooa,” Wen Yuan then beckons to be picked up, and Lan Jingyi throws a nervous glance over to Wen Qing.

The woman has calmed down since their first meeting, but Jingyi is still a little cautious around her.

Looking over, however, she doesn't display any outward objections to the request, and so Lan Jingyi proceeds to pick up the toddler version of his best friend.

"This is how tall you're gonna be when you're eighteen."

While Wen Yuan tries to process that information, Wen Qing sharply cuts through Jingyi's thoughts,

"So you're from fifteen years in the future, then?"

Lan Jingyi freezes.

Shit .

Is that bad? Should they know that? Could that give something away?

"...I... might be."

Wen Qing nods as if she is taking mental notes, and Jingyi needs to *get a hold of himself*.

Accidental information slipping is totally preventable, *so why is he so bad at this?*

"How do you even know I'm telling the truth? I could be crazy," To emphasize his point, Jingyi fluctuates his voice in a spooky way around his next words, "I could just be some troubled youth who likes to pull pranks."

It's definitely... an attempt. The best attempt, anyway, that Lan Jingyi can make to keep the timeline from crumbling.

Wen Ning, for his part, actually looks like he's considering it. Wen Qing, however, is having none of it. She levels Jingyi a look that makes him want to shrink away to avoid its intensity.

"No one's crazy enough to enter the Burial Mounds willingly. No one's crazy enough to be calm around my brother like you are. And *no one* from the four major sects is crazy enough to be nice to any remaining Wen dogs."

Lan Jingyi stutters a little bit, but Wen Qing is continuing over him,

"Who leaps up in joy at the sight of a sentient fierce corpse?"

"I— I wouldn't say I *leaped* —"

"You should have recognized me. You should have recognized that we're some of the remaining Wens, and you should've killed us."

Lan Jingyi stays silent.

It's hard to argue against cold facts. Especially when that would mean he would have to argue in favor of killing some of his favorite people.

So, Lan Jingyi stays silent.

"Yea," Wen Qing breathes, seemingly satisfied, "that's what I thought."

Wen Yuan, who had been anxiously trying to speak for the last few minutes, but never finding an opportunity, finally gets a chance out of the awkward silence created,

"When do I get to meet my Poor-gege! When, when, when!"

Gently, Wen Ning reminds A-Yuan how to ask for things nicely, and the little boy has to repeat his question, but nicer this time around.

"When will I meet you in this time?"

"Well," Lan Jingyi thinks, racking his memory that is so long ago it's risking being forgotten, "I think we probably met in one of our classes, so perhaps when you're four?"

"Classes?" A-Yuan repeats, his mouth shaping weirdly around the unfamiliar word "What are classes?"

Lan Jingyi starts to answer, but Wen Qing once again interrupts,

"Lan classes? He is allowed to attend classes at such an early age with the Lan?"

Lan Jingyi's mouth snaps shut.

Stop, he's practically begging himself in his own mind, *he needs to stop*.

"Enough!" He's saying (not quite yelling, but not being quiet either).

With all of the fake confidence he can muster, but still somehow sounding desperate, Lan Jingyi says again, "That's-that's enough— *I* ask the questions now."

Wildly, he points at all three of the Wens,

"No more questions from the crowd, okay?"

Wen Ning nods dutifully, along with A-Yuan who seems to take Jingyi's tone to mean he is joking. Wen Qing cocks one sarcastic eyebrow higher, but otherwise asks no more questions.

"Good." Lan Jingyi breaths out, feeling shaky, "...good."

He just. Needs. A. Moment.

Their conversation is so fast-paced, it's like a horse veering dangerously out of Lan Jingyi's control.

He needs to pause. He needs to *think*. He needs to *keep the timeline intact*.

Taking a deep breath, Jingyi wrangles with himself to take control back,

“I ask the questions,” He breathes out, slowly and deliberately.

The other three eye him with different levels of doubt, but that’s okay. *Lan Jingyi is a Lan, he can control his mouth.*

Feeling more sure of himself, Jingyi speaks up confidently.

“Now. How do I get home then?”

Wen Qing scoffs,

“How are we supposed to know that? You’re the one that came here.”

Jingyi feels his façade falter.

“I... wait, what? You don’t know how to send me home?”

Wen Qing shrugs, and only continues to stare him down.

Don’t look at me for answers, is what her stare says.

“No, wait, I can’t *stay* here. I need to get back to my friends. They’re probably still fighting the spirit...”

Wen Ning bows his head in a sort of apology,

“We’re sorry, but like my sister said. *You came here...*”

...*We can’t help you,* is the implied end to that sentence.

“Wait, wait, but I—I—” He had *just* gotten control of himself and of the conversation, but now suddenly he’s floundering again.

How is he supposed to do this? What is he supposed to do now?

But the Wen siblings are right, how would they know how to fix Jingyi’s problems?

Lan Jingyi doesn’t know why he ever expected them to have the answer, it’s just that they’re both responsible shaped and Jingyi had forgotten they’re both as clueless as he is.

Feeling embarrassed, Lan Jingyi simply shakes his head,

“No, no, I’m sorry. Of course I shouldn’t expect that you guys would have an answer for me...”

“...I’m the one in this mess, sorry.”

Wen Qing eyes him up and down, (something Jingyi doesn’t see, as he’s too busy making worried faces at the dirt to notice).

Sighing, Wen Qing speaks up,

“Wait for Wei Wuxian to get home.”

Jingyi’s head snaps up,

“What?”

Wen Qing rolls her eyes, but continues anyway,

“Wei Wuxian could probably find a way to send you home, but he’s out right now. Wait for him to get back.”

Wei-qianbei.

Wei-qianbei *exists* in this time.

In all the other revelations, Jingyi had almost forgotten that there are other people he knows here.

A huge smile breaks out across his face,

“Wei-qianbei!” He practically cheers, “Of course!”

A-Yuan, precious as he is, joins in on Jingyi’s celebration,

“Xian-gege! Of course, Xian-gege!” He chants along, despite probably not understanding why.

A ghost of a smile appears on Wen Qing’s face as she watches the two of them—Lan Jingyi bouncing A-Yuan around as he yells, and the boy shrieking in delight as a response,

“I’m saved! I’m saved! Wei-qianbei will save me!”

Quickly, Wen Qing shakes her smile away,

“So, you know him?” She says sharply, “In the future, I mean.”

Lan Jingyi, now spinning A-Yuan around in a circle, responds without thinking,

“Oh yea! Wei-qianbei is so cool! He’ll definitely know what to do here.”

Lan Jingyi doesn’t realize it, but Wen Qing scratches out another note in her mind.

Wei Wuxian survives.

Lan Jingyi, however, continues to be oblivious to the amount of information Wen Qing is scraping out of him.

“Wei-qianbei! Wei-qianbei! Wei-qianbei!” He chants along with A-Yuan, smiling the entire time.

All he has to do is wait for Wei-qianbei to come home.

Then all his problems will be solved.

— — —

Jin Ling's current priority is to get through a conversation with his mother without accidentally giving away his real identity.

Theoretically, it *should* be extremely difficult.

Every part of Jin Ling should *want* to reveal his identity to her. To run to his mother, and tell her, *Look at me, I am your son!*

But, Jin Ling finds this is not the case.

It is extremely easy for him to hide behind Zizhen's name. No part of him begs to be discovered. Nothing inside of him screams, *tell her!*

In fact, it is the opposite.

Every part of Jin Ling wants Madame Jin to *never, ever* discover he is her son, because what if—

He cuts that thought off abruptly.

That is not where his thoughts need to be going right now.

What he *needs* to focus on is getting back to his time, back to his friends, and back to his night hunt. In doing that, he can avoid exposing his real identity.

Jin Ling clears his throat and simultaneously clears his mind of such thoughts,

“*Theoretically*,” He's saying while playing nervously with his own fingers, “I should return to my time in about two weeks. That is what happened to all the other victims.”

~~His mom~~ Madame Jin nods along, listening intently to ~~her son~~ Jin Ling.

“But I don't think I can wait that long. It is of utmost importance that I get back as soon as possible.”

Madame Jin had taken the news of Jin Ling's time travel quite well, actually.

She had of course asked for proof, to which Jin Ling had struggled to provide. Eventually, he decided to recount a story that his Da-jiu had once told him while obscenely drunk.

It was a story about how his father had confessed feelings for his mother for the first time.

This story was a great shame for most of the present sects, so it did not circulate gossip channels. For Jin Ling to know this, particularly the detail about Wei Wuxian holding back tears (something only Jiang Yanli had witnessed) he would have to either be omniscient, or come from the future.

Between the two options, Jiang Yanli easily accepted Jin Ling's '*from the future*' claim.

"So, as you can see," Jin Ling continues, "a trip to the library is all I will need in order to research how I might go about doing that,"

Jin Ling ducks his head and pushes out his chair, making to leave as soon as possible,

"Please, if you'll excuse me."

Because Jin Ling needs to *leave*.

Every muscle in his body is tied as tight as a bow string, flexing for a chance to sprint away. Jin Ling scrambles so hard on his exit that the chair he had been occupying clutters around harshly as he bumps into it in his haste to get away from ~~his mom~~ Madame Jin.

The longer he stays, the more likely she will be to discover his secret.

Jin Ling has never been great at lying. Even dummies like Lan Jingyi can spot his lies with ease. That is why it is absolutely imperative that he make it to the door, and—

"Ah, please. Would you wait a moment?"

Jin Ling freezes.

Halfway to the door. *Damn*.

Jerkily, he turns around to face the woman he desperately would like to escape from.

Jiang Yanli has twisted around in her chair in order to face him. Her expression is slightly confused, but still gentle

"Please, stay. I think I know of a simpler way to help you."

And Jin Ling doesn't doubt that. According to everything he's ever heard, Jiang Yanli is comparable to a magic salve that is capable of fixing your every problem. It is even rumored that she would have been capable of fixing the broken relationship between Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng, if only she were around in his time.

Jin Ling had always assumed that when people talked about her like this, it was just to placate a boy who had never met his mother.

Now that he's met her, he can understand the reputation.

Feeling like he's walking on wooden legs, Jin Ling stiltedly makes his way back to the chair he had previously occupied.

Saying nothing, he retakes his seat.

"My brother, Wei Wuxian—" Jin Ling startles at the familiar name. He is shocked to hear it thrown around so casually by Madame Jin when she knows nothing of her own fate.

Quickly, Jiang Yanli tries to calm him, "*I know* , I know he's the Yiling Patriarch to most people—"

Jin Ling tries to not give away somehow in his face that *that is not why he was shocked*.

"—but he really is a genius. He doesn't deserve the reputation he has. If you just trust me, I'm sure he could send you back home."

Jiang Yanli is looking at him with imploring eyes, as if she were the one asking for a favor and not it being the other way around.

Stiffly, Jin Ling nods.

"Ye—yea, I, yea, I could go to Yiling."

Yiling—that is where Wei Wuxian should be in this time, right? Jin Ling's history is a little rusty, but he's pretty sure his Da-jiu should be residing in the Burial Mounds right about now.

Jiang Yanli tilts a confused head at him,

"You're not afraid to go see the Yiling Patriarch all by yourself?"

Jin Ling's spine goes stiff as a board,

"What? Er—yea! Sure, I suppose I'm scared of that idio— *guy!* Of that guy."

"Don't worry, then," Jiang Yanli clasps her hands together, "I'll accompany you, no problem at all."

"*What!*" Jin Ling shrieks, before clearing his throat, "There's, *really* , no need. No need at all! I can handle Wei Wuxian, believe me."

Jiang Yanli laughs amused,

"You don't need to act so tough, kid. He's my brother, it would not be a problem for me to accompany you."

He's my uncle! Jin Ling wants to shout, but bites his tongue.

“Besides, he’s not very... *receptive* to cultivators these days. He might not be keen to help you unless I convince him.”

Jin Ling deflates.

“But...” He whispers, not knowing what to even argue anymore.

Jiang Yanli looks at him.

Jin Ling loses all the fight in his body.

“...Okay, yea. This one thanks you for your kindness, Madame Jin,” he mumbles.

Jiang Yanli doesn’t beam, exactly, but her face does become softer. With a hand beckoning Jin Ling to follow, she stands up and makes to leave.

Feeling reluctant, Jin Ling stands up and follows.

Once the two have left the kitchens, it is easier to see the differences between this Koi Tower and the one from the future. This Koi Tower looks a little newer, with different decorations. There aren’t as many knicks and cracks in the wall like Jin Ling is used to, and there’s significantly less people running around.

Even though the Jin had not contributed much to the war effort, they had still contributed *some*. It’s different, somehow, *knowing* that war can affect a sect like this, and actually *seeing* it with his own eyes.

He hates to think about how Lotus Pier might look right now in the aftermath of the war. How few people probably walk the halls there.

As the two walk through these halls, it is in relative silence.

Jin Ling is still too scared to speak up. Scared he might slip up and say something stupid like, *Hey, I’m your son!*

Jiang Yanli, free of that worry, starts a conversation,

“So, Jin Zizhen, you said you’re fifteen years in the past? How can you tell?”

Jin Ling almost trips over his own two feet.

“Uhm... what?...Did I say that?”

Jiang Yanli looks over amused, but otherwise doesn’t say anything. She just waits for a response.

“Yea, yes. I guess I did, uhm, say that. How did I know?”

The reason Jin Ling had said that earlier is because he knows the child in Jiang Yanli’s stomach is *himself*. His own age, then, should be how far in the past he has traveled.

Give or take a little.

“Well, er, *Jin Ling*,” He begins feeling wrong-footed.

Jiang Yanli does a little start at the name, and for a brief, irrational second Jin Ling fears he has been caught, and flinches in reciprocation.

Mentally berating himself for that, Jin Ling tries to continue as if he didn’t just have a small panic attack,

“—In my time, he’s fifteen.”

“Sorry,” Jiang Yanli is apologizing, presumably for her flinching earlier, “It is just strange to hear his name from someone who is not my husband.”

With a soft smile, the woman drops a hand to rest lovingly on her stomach,

“It sounds nice,” she says wistfully.

Awkwardly, Jin Ling looks away.

Jiang Yanli, however, is not discouraged by his continued silence. Instead, she speaks up in a light teasing voice now,

“Yes, I suppose that would explain how you knew so fast.”

Jin Ling, still feeling more feelings than he can handle over his mom saying his name sounds nice, only manages a single nod in reply.

“You must know my son pretty well, then?”

And this time he really does trip over his feet—He’s stopped from falling flat on his face only by his quick reflexes,

“I didn’t say that!” He’s practically panicking.

Jiang Yanli giggles into her hand,

“Well, you call him without titles and by his given name. Forgive me if I have overstepped.”

“Everyone calls him that!” Jin Ling is saying a little hysterically.

“Oh?” Jiang Yanli asks, still sounding amused, “Why’s that?”

“His courtesy name’s stupid! He doesn’t like people using it...”

And now, Jiang Yanli is laughing fully,

“Oh, my poor A-Xian,” She’s saying between laughs, “He’ll be so sad to hear that.”

Poor Wei Wuxian? Poor Jin Ling! He's the one who has had to endure the dumb name!

Grumbling to himself, Jin Ling is cut off when Jiang Yanli asks gently,

“Will you tell me about him?”

Jin Ling stops.

“You want me to tell you about... Jin Ling?”

“Mhm,” Jiang Yanli is confirming, looking at him with an inviting smile.

But this is exactly what Jin Ling had wanted to avoid. He hadn’t wanted to be perceived by his mother. Hadn’t wanted her to know *anything* about him.

What would she say when she finds out he’s a hot-tempered, spoiled brat, little mistress that most of everyone doesn’t like?

What is Jin Ling supposed to do if she doesn’t like him?

“I don’t really know him that well...” he finally mumbles back under his breath.

“Is that so?” Jiang Yanli asks, sounding more amused than the situation calls for, “Surely you must’ve heard some stories?”

Jin Ling shakes his head firmly,

“Not really...” He replies stubbornly.

Finally, the two reach the front doors of the building section of Koi Tower, and they now step outside for the first time.

This, too, is slightly different from the Koi Tower that Jin Ling knows.

Trees that are massive in the future, are nothing but saplings here. Grass that was green for the summer in his own time is now just a dried up brown color in this time’s autumn.

It serves as an abrupt reminder for Jin Ling that he is truly far from home.

“We will probably have to travel to Yiling on horseback, is that okay?” Jiang Yanli asks him.

Jin Ling nods distractedly, still looking around at all the changes in slight awe.

As they head down the gilded steps in search of the stables, Jiang Yanli bows respectfully to the guard at the door. He bows back, tries not to send a curious glance towards Jin Ling, and fails.

Jin Ling brushes it off. It doesn’t matter anyway, he’ll be back in his own time soon enough.

They walk down the steps in relative silence now. Jin Ling still does not want to be the conversation starter.

Of course, that doesn’t last for long,

“You must not have a lot of nice things to say about Jin Ling, then. At least, nothing you are willing to tell his mother,” Jiang Yanli says, picking up the conversation exactly where Jin Ling had left it in hopes of it dying.

She turns to him with a smile that is too warm to fit what she has just said, and Jin Ling can’t even think of a good response. He finds he can only stare at her wide eyed.

Still smiling, she reaches out to brush the hair out of his eyes,

“Such a respectful young boy, it’s nice that you would consider my feelings.”

And suddenly, Jin Ling notices that within this day alone he has received the most compliments he has ever gotten in his entire life.

Most people insult him, and ask who could’ve possibly raised him to be so rude. Most people call him names, and then get angry when he fights back. Most people can’t find anything within him that’s worthy of being complimented.

Never has he ever been perceived as anything other than a piece of shit, rich kid, asshole. The people in his life have made certain that Jin Ling is aware of this.

Madame Jin is the first (if not only) person to ever compliment his character.

“...And if I did have bad things to say about him?” He asks finally.

Jiang Yanli looks at him confused, so Jin Ling clarifies,

“If I had a lot of negative things to say about him, then what would you think? Would you be disappointed in your son?”

Madame Jin gives him a look that is hard to decipher.

It is perhaps a mix of both fondness and pity. Jin Ling shifts uncomfortably as the recipient of said look.

“...No,” she says simply, “I don’t think I would be, in that scenario.”

Jin Ling’s chest fills with an emotion he can’t quite name.

Feeling overwhelmed, all he can do is nod stiffly as he desperately avoids eye contact. He fears if he were to make eye contact with Madame Jin again he might burst into tears.

“Okay,” he says.

And makes his way down the rest of the stairs.

Lan Sizhui has never felt more stupid in his entire life.

“I’m,” he pauses, swallows, tries to breathe through his nose, “I’m in the past?”

~~Yuandao~~ Wei Wuxian, *Wei-qianbei*, Xian-gege, stares back at him,

“Hate to be the bearer of bad news...”

And he really does look apologetic. Empathetic in the same way Wei-qianbei had looked at him when he had to tell Sizhui one of the older bunnies had passed away.

Lan Sizhui looks around, but this time with the knowledge of where he is.

“We’re in Yiling?” He’s saying as he turns to look at that unfamiliar face.

Wei-qianbei nods once.

“Then... you’re living in the Burial Mounds... *with me*?”

Another nod.

Lan Sizhui looks at the man in front of him and sees the face of the man who raised him as a child.

It’s almost heartbreaking.

He’s so thin, so familiar. He’s wearing Wei-qianbei’s facial expressions and clothes, but he’s not the Wei-qianbei that Lan Sizhui knows.

This Wei Wuxian has no golden core. Not even the feeble one that Mo Xuanyu had attempted to develop.

It’s so obvious that Lan Sizhui is baffled momentarily that the man could have kept such a thing a secret for so long.

If Wei Wuxian had a golden core, he should’ve been able to practice inedia to make sure that he would never become as skinny as he is right now. If Wei Wuxian had a golden core, he should have been able to moderate his body temperature in a way that never would have allowed him to be cold. If Wei Wuxian had a golden core, he should have been able to rely on its energy to ensure he never tires enough to develop the eyebags he has now.

This Wei Wuxian does not have a golden core, so he is skinny, shivering, and tired.

Lan Sizhui almost wishes Hanguang-jun were in front of him now. Wishes he could grab the man who raised him and shake some sense into him.

Should Wei Wuxian look like this if he had a golden core? He wants to scream just a little bit.

Watching the man currently trying to repress small shivers against the cold wind is heartbreaking to the point that Lan Sizhui absolutely cannot stand to do nothing.

Delicately, he removes his outer robe that acts as a coat.

“Here,” He says as he tries to hand it over to Wei Wuxian.

Immediately, the other is protesting,

“Woa, woa! What's this all the sudden, hm? Why are you giving this old man your coat?”

Wei Wuxian is trying to push Lan Sizhui's persistent hands back, but he is having none of it.

“Wei-qianbei, really, *please*, take it—“

The robe is pushed back and forth.

“Aiyah, again with the qianbei—Seriously, kid, I don't know why you think I need this—“

“Xian-gege,” Lan Sizhui says.

The nickname hasn't been used in awhile, but it still rolls off his tongue effortlessly. It is a card that Sizhui only plays when truly desperate to make Wei Wuxian comply.

It works just as well here as it does in the future.

The resisting hands go a little slack, and Wei Wuxian's face takes on a shocked look.

Now, with no more obstacles, Lan Sizhui drapes the pure white over his Xian-gege's shoulders. Fiddles with tying the strings as he says simply,

“You're cold.”

Wei Wuxian's eyes widen as he watches Lan Sizhui finish tying the strings together.

“...”

The implication is clear to both of them. Wei Wuxian, if he had a golden core, should never have been capable of getting cold.

Lan Sizhui knows this, and still gave him his outer robe. Still called him out on being cold.

Wei Wuxian's face relaxes from wide-eyed shock into simple warmth,

“Such a generous young master. Lan Zhan really must've raised you right.”

His tone is a little wistful and Sizhui, finally done positioning the robe over his shoulders, looks up to make meaningful eye contact,

“I said you raised me as well.”

“Ah,” Wei Wuxian looks a little startled at that, “Well, I try my best, but you know...”

And there’s an elephant in this room. Of course there is when one of them is from the future, and the other is not.

“About the things I said back in the tavern...” Lan Sizhui starts.

“Oh,” Wei Wuxian, *bizarrely*, drops his gaze down towards the ground.

The wind picks up, and seemingly subconsciously, Wei Wuxian pulls the robe around himself a little tighter,

“I get it. You probably don’t want to be the bearer of bad news either, so no worries! You don’t have to tell me anything about your time—“

Lan Sizhui, uncharacteristically, cuts in,

“Wei-qianbei, I feel like you’ve gotta know—“

“Really, kid, I’m not that interested in the future. You probably should protect the integrity of your timeline or whatever—“

“I don’t care about the timeline, I have to tell you that—“

“I know, *I know*. I know what you’re gonna say.”

At the same time, they both speak up and say—

“Lan Zhan married me out of pity.”

“You’re going to die very soon.”

—and then they both freeze.

Wei Wuxian blinks, “What did you say?”

“You were talking about what I said about your marriage?”

Wei Wuxian frowns,

“Well, I mean, yea?”

Lan Sizhui feels baffled,

“You think Hanguang-jun... pities you?”

Lamely, the other is shrugging.

“I... I don’t know what Lan Zhan thinks of me anymore,” And then he turns to look calculatingly at Sizhui, “You, well, you *know* that we’re not exactly *equals* anymore. How could I ever measure up to someone like the Second Jade of Lan when I’m just... *this* .”

Wei Wuxian grabs the ends of the white robe Sizhui had given him, and gestures with it on the last word.

It takes the younger boy a second to understand what he is implying. When he does, Sizhui feels another crack go down his heart.

Sitting side by side, Lan Sizhui lets out a shaky breath, and gives into his childish desire to be comforted a little bit. Closing his eyes, the boy leans until his head rests against the other’s shoulder,

“Xian-gege,” He says quietly.

Wei Wuxian brings up a hand that strokes Sizhui’s head absentmindedly. It’s quite nice.

“Hm?” He responds gently.

“You did so much. You *gave* so much. To me, to your family, to everyone.”

There is no reply, but that’s okay. Sizhui’s not done,

“It’s not fair,” and if his voice breaks a little on the last word, then Wei Wuxian is kind enough to not point it out.

Instead, the older man huffs out a small, disbelieving laugh,

“Ah, my A-Yuan, don’t worry about me, okay? I’m fine, it’s probably my own fault I’m here anyway. I always tried to do impossible things... I took dark, narrow roads.”

And then they sit in silence until—

“He loves you.”

The hand lightly petting him stills.

“... ”

“What did you say?”

Lan Sizhui keeps his head resting on Wei Wuxian’s shoulder, and stares unblinkingly ahead when he says,

“He married you out of love. *You* married *him* out of love. In the future, you’re both in love.”

Before Wei Wuxian has time to process that, however, Sizhui is barreling forward,

“You’re not a screw-up, Wei-qianbei. I know these were hard times for us, but you only ever made the right choices.”

Wei Wuxian inhales sharply, and Sizhui takes this as a sign to keep going,

“You did the right thing, and you saved my life in doing so.”

Now it’s Wei Wuxian’s breath that is coming out a little shaky. It doesn’t matter, Sizhui feels it needed to be said.

“...You’re really something else, kid.”

Wei Wuxian lets out a wet sounding laugh,

“When did you become so articulate, hm? I swear it was only just a few days ago I was telling you that you’re old enough to make decisions, and now look at you.”

Lightly, Wei Wuxian turns and lifts Sizhui’s head. He cups Sizhui’s face in his palms gently, and searches his face as he says,

“Telling this old man that he’s not a screw-up.”

Sizhui grins lightly in between Wei Wuxian’s two hands, but willingly allows the other to inspect him.

After one last calculating look, Wei Wuxian pats his cheek softly,

“Growing up so fast,” he mumbles under his breath, and Sizhui has to hold back a comment about how there is a perfectly immature version of himself still in existence somewhere in this time.

“So, me and your Hanguang-jun, we’re in love, huh?”

Lan Sizhui nods, smiling a little,

“Yes. Very much so.”

“That’s... certainly something.”

The way he says it, laughing a little and shaking his head, it’s almost as if Wei Wuxian doesn’t believe him.

That’s okay, Sizhui thinks, he’ll realize it soon enough.

“But I’m gonna die soon?”

The smile fades from Sizhui’s face at the topic change.

“Yes.”

Wei Wuxian whistles lowly,

“Well. That is unfortunate.”

And Sizhui can’t help it, he cracks a smile again.

“Wei-qianbei...” He groans, begging the man to take something seriously for once.

“What! I’m taking this very seriously, I am *very* concerned.”

The way he is laughing while he says it does not help sell his lie.

“This is very serious, yea?” Sizhui urges, “It was, like, a big deal.”

“Oh sure,” Wei Wuxian waves a dismissive hand through the air, “My death, blah, blah, blah. I’m sure my resurrection was a *much* bigger deal.”

And Lan Sizhui will give the man this—he’s not completely wrong. News of Wei Wuxian’s resurrection was probably bigger and more anticipated than the man’s original death.

“You believe it’s possible you’re gonna be raised from the dead?”

Sizhui isn’t exactly sure why he’s trying to make the other doubt him. It just feels like Wei Wuxian is taking the news too easily.

Case and point, Wei Wuxian only replies with a nonchalant shrug,

“You’re my A-Yuan, but you don’t recognize this face? Not to mention, you were very adamant back then that you ‘*know with absolute certainty*’ what the Yiling Patriarch’s face looks like.”

Lan Sizhui flushes at the reminder, but otherwise stays quiet.

“You gave away a lot in that tavern, little radish. I’m old, not slow, okay?”

Lan Sizhui would like to point out that Wei Wuxian is not even that old, especially in this time, but he bites his tongue.

“I assume the Wens don’t make it then?”

And now the joking tone is gone.

Lan Sizhui glances to the side to see Wei Wuxian has now donned a serious look. Almost solemn.

Turning back to face forward, Lan Sizhui says quietly,

“Only me.”

And then off-handedly,

“And, well, Wen Ning, but that’s because... you know.”

Wei Wuxian looks at the ground, so Lan Sizhui continues,

“...They planned a siege. You did your best, but the numbers...”

As he trails off, Sizhui also turns his gaze towards the ground.

“I only survived because you hid me in a tree trunk. Several days later, Hanguang-jun came to save me. I was raised as a Lan ever since.”

Wei Wuxian smiles in a way that can only be bittersweet.

“Ahh, of course Lan Zhan saved you. He’s really too good.”

“You saved me too,” Sizhui is quick to remind, but Wei Wuxian only hums non-committedly.

“You could meet them, you know.”

And, yes. Sizhui knows.

It was practically the first thing he thought about when he realized where they are. What point in time they’re at.

Wei Wuxian looks at him imploringly,

“If you don’t remember my face, you probably don’t remember them either.”

Sizhui nods to confirm the theory.

“So... if you wanted, you could come back to the Burial Mounds with me. Meet all of them.”

“I—“

Lan Sizhui stops himself.

He wants to meet them. *God*, he wants to meet them.

He just doesn’t know if he *should* meet them.

Wei-qianbei is someone he has in the future. Someone he cannot lose when he returns to his time.

This is not the case for the rest of his family.

Lan Sizhui is afraid that if he were to meet them, it would be too painful to part again. That maybe he would never want to leave if he did.

Slowly, all he can do is shake his head.

Wei Wuxian, who has been watching him intensely, leans back and nods in understanding,

“Yea...”

Lan Sizhui ducks his head, and wipes at his eyes. He feels Wei-qianbei place a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“... I get it, kid,” He’s mumbling as he rubs soothing circles on his back.

And it’s crazy how much self restraint Sizhui finds he is capable of.

His hands, his body, *his entire self* is literally shaking with the urge to go see his family. It is something he has dreamed of, something he has chased with Wen Ning, and something that is now impossibly within his grasp.

However, now, with his family so close, the only thing Lan Sizhui can do is clasp his hands together in a tight grip. Restrain one shaking hand with the other shaking hand.

From his tightened throat, Sizhui holds back any sounds that threaten to come up. As much as Sizhui is a Wen, he is also a Lan. He can control his desires easily.

“Then,” Wei Wuxian says softly, still moving his hand in comforting motions along Sizhui’s back, “I can send you home soon.”

Sizhui squeezes his eyes shut. Tight.

Of course, Wei Wuxian would already know how to send him home. *Of course.*

“Yea,” Sizhui manages to reply in a short burst that sounds a little like a sob.

“Oh, my sweet boy. Come here, A-Yuan.”

And it’s almost immediate, the speed at which Lan Sizhui turns from gripping his own hands tightly, to squeezing his arms around Wei Wuxian. So tight, he fears he might be restraining the other’s breath a little bit. He buries his head against his Xian-gege’s robes and cries. Cries, and cries, and doesn’t think about the mess of tears he’s making of himself.

It’s perhaps the most unrestrained Lan Sizhui has ever been in his whole life.

“You’re okay, you’re okay. Such a strong little radish, yea?”

Wei Wuxian mumbles absentminded comforts while he strokes Lan Sizhui’s hair.

“So good. So kind. You’re doing so well, I’m so proud of you.”

Lan Sizhui sobs harder, because it is *hard*.

Half the reason he clutches to Wei Wuxian’s robes so tightly is to physically prevent himself from running away. Prevent himself from climbing up the Burial Mounds and collapsing at the feet of the people who came before him. Who cared for him first. Who made sure he alone survived their massacre.

It is extremely hard.

And so, Lan Sizhui clutches to his Xian-gege tighter, and sobs openly.

For the other option would be much, much harder.

— — —

“So, basically, you’re saying I... *shouldn’t* trust A-yao?”

Ouyang Zizhen nods emphatically.

“Or my father?”

Ouyang Zizhen keeps nodding.

“Or Su She, or my cousin?”

Ouyang Zizhen smiles wide,

“Yea! You got it!”

It has taken over half the trip to Koi Tower to explain all of the events of the future that Ouyang Zizhen has deemed important for Jin Zixuan to know. Some of it, Zizhen can admit to himself, was unnecessary fluff to romanticize the story. However! He stands by the fact that it made the story more captivating.

He’s not a Lan, okay! His stories don’t have to sound like an official night hunt report.

Jin Zixuan, for his part, has taken a lot of the news extremely well. Zizhen assumes this must be because none of it has *actually* happened yet. To him, it must *really* feel like just a story.

The only part that was a little difficult to swallow was... well—

“Jin Ling... grows up without us?”

Ouyang Zizhen winces, “...Yea.”

Jin Zixuan turns his gaze down to the dirt, prompting Zizhen to rush in with comfort,

“But don’t worry! He has Sect Leader Jiang! And, of course, uhm, Wei-qianbei now. Also, almost a million Uncles! Uncles as far as the eye can see!”

Jin Zixuan cuts an eye to look over at him, so Zizhen continues,

“And, bonus! That’s not gonna happen in this timeline...” Ouyang Zizhen looks over at his friend’s dad for confirmation, “Right?”

Based on the light (intensive) reading he has done on time travel, Zizhen has concluded that he should *absolutely* tell Jin Zixuan everything he possibly can about the future in order to stop it from happening here.

According to the theories he has read, (and thus later discussed with local genius—Wei Wuxian) Ouyang Zizhen’s actions here should *not* have an effect on his own timeline.

Instead, he has only created a whole new alternate version of reality that now splits from the one he came from.

This is why most old and modern Time Travel Theorists have concluded that trying to prevent tragedies of the past is not an endeavor that is useful. It would be impossible to stop the tragedy for your own self, but would only stop it for a different version of yourself.

Zizhen understands this, knows this, realizes he won’t be changing anything, but figures, you know, while he’s here... Why not help these people, even if it doesn’t help himself?

This theory is supported by the fact that the victims who had already been affected by the original spirit—the people who had already traveled back to the past—did not report wild incongruities with their present knowledge along with their crazy stories of meeting dead relatives.

And so, looking toward Jin Ling’s dad for confirmation that he plans to stay alive this time around, Zizhen tilts his head in a silent question,

“Right...” Jin Zixuan mumbles, “This time I won’t...die,” He finishes awkwardly.

Ouyang Zizhen beams,

“That’s the spirit!”

Jin Zixuan looks at him for a moment. A moment long enough for Zizhen to become slightly self-aware.

“What?” He laughs nervously.

The older man only shakes his head,

“Nothing, just thinking I’m glad that you are my son’s friend.”

Zizhen startles at the unexpected compliment.

“Oh!” He says blinking rapidly, “Thank you, uh—Sir!”

Jin Zixuan nods once in unsure acknowledgment. When he turns away, he still looks troubled.

“Something wrong?” Zizhen asks before remembering that perhaps he should maintain healthy boundaries with strangers he just met.

“I mean,” He’s hastily correcting, “don’t feel obliged to tell me what’s wrong! I just...”

Quickly, he trails off, unsure about what he even should say.

Thankfully, the other saves him the embarrassment,

“It’s okay. I—I just...don’t know how to fix the problems you have described.”

Ouyang Zizhen opens his mouth confused, but Jin Zixuan beats him to it,

“Not—not in like, a ‘I don’t know how to avoid my death’ kind of way. You were... *very* thorough on that part.”

Zizhen feels himself flush at the comment, but listens intently still,

“No, I mean, the corruption? Jin Guangyao, my father, my cousin. How am I— *what* am I even supposed to do? How would I even fix that?”

The man mumbles the last part quietly and toward the ground,

“I just don’t know what I should do now.”

And, whoops, maybe Ouyang Zizhen shouldn’t have dropped all of this on the poor man all at once.

At least for him, Former Sect Leader Jin Guangshan and Jin Zixun had been dead for as long as Zizhen could remember.

He had forgotten that these people were family to Jin Zixuan. That he had opinions about them prior to Ouyang Zizhen exposing them.

Big oversight on his part.

“What about MianMian?” Ouyang Zizhen says after a moment of pondering.

Jin Zixuan snaps his head over to look at him.

“Er—I mean, Miss Luo Qingyang? From what I understand, she stood up for what was right when leaving the Jin sect?”

Jin Zixuan looks to be remembering something, before he nods in confirmation.

“So, yea! Maybe you should invite her back. Offer her a position as an advisor. Yes, it’ll cause confusion and backlash, however, you’re the sole legitimate heir. After a certain point, there’s not a lot they could refuse of you.”

Nervously, the younger boys plays with his fingers as he rambles on some more,

“As far as your family members go... well, probably just keep a watchful eye on them? If you’re not down with murder and stuff, you could settle for not trusting them,” Zizhen shrugs.

Up ahead on the path, Koi tower is growing bigger and bigger as the two approach it.

Jin Zixuan is still looking at him consideringly, so Ouyang Zizhen takes a deep breath and continues,

“Just start there. Simply. Eventually, you can replace all your advisors with people you trust, like MianMian, and not just with your blood relatives.

“That is how you can weed out your corruption.”

Ouyang Zizhen hopes he hasn’t stepped out of turn. He is, you know, talking to his superior in every sense of the word—Status-wise, age-wise, life experience-wise.

It seems he hasn’t, however, because Jin Zixuan claps him on the shoulder.

He still struggles to make eye contact, just as Jin Ling does when he’s feeling awkward, but the older man pushes through it,

“Thank you. I will follow your advice.”

Ouyang Zizhen flushes at the praise,

“Ah! No, no it’s nothing, really! It’s easier for me to speak with hindsight. I’m not usually so wise, I swear,” At this point, he’s just babbling, but he can’t help it!

It feels the same way as when Hanguang-jun or Wei-qianbei offer him praise—

Like Zizhen could simply die from happiness at being recognized as good by these people who are so amazing by themselves.

When the two finally reach the outer gates to Koi Tower, Zizhen is still mumbling denials.

“Young Master Zizhen,”

The boy starts at the address,

“Y-yes?”

“You are a good friend of my son’s, and you have done me a tremendous favor today. Of course I must thank you.”

It successfully shocks Zizhen into stopping his mumbled deflections, and before he can recover, Jin Zixuan is walking through the gates and up the grand staircase.

“Follow me. I must introduce you to my wife.”

Numbly, Ouyang Zizhen follows behind him.

“Oh, right, yes, of course! Maiden Jiang—or Madame Jin, sorry, yes!”

He had almost forgotten that they were on a mission to find Jin Ling’s mother. Now he remembers how Jin Zixuan had declared with such certainty that his wife would somehow know how to fix Zizhen’s problem.

Ouyang Zizhen isn’t quite sure he knows why or how, but he certainly doesn’t question their plan.

Scrambling up the stairs to catch up, Zizhen puts that thought to the side for now.

“Excuse me,” Jin Zixuan is stopping one of the guards standing in front of the double doors that lead to the interior of Koi Tower, “My wife hasn’t left, has she?”

The guard bows low just as Ouyang Zizhen comes up to stand respectfully behind Jin Zixuan,

“Young Master Jin, Madame Jin actually left around two incense sticks worth of time ago.”

Under his breath, Jin Zixuan lets out what sounds like a curse.

“Did she inform anyone where she was going?”

The guard shakes his head.

Jin Zixuan sighs deeply, seems to think for a second, then stiffly salutes the guard before turning and walking right back down the stairs.

“What?” Ouyang Zizhen can’t help but exclaim, “She’s not here?”

Quickly, he makes to follow down the stairs.

“A-Li said she might go out today,” Jin Zixuan says while slowing his pace to allow Zizhen to catch up, “She did not specify where, only that she was feeling bored.”

Zizhen nods along, and asks,

“So, what do we do now?”

The man closes his eyes and stops walking. His face looks as if he is fighting off a migraine.

“Jin-gongzi?” He asks, feeling uncertain.

Jin Zixuan opens his eyes and looks down at the rest of the stairs,

“We needed to find A-Li because I wanted her to accompany us.”

“Accompany us where?”

Jin Zixuan, instead of answering, starts to trek down the stairs once again.

Baffled, Zizhen follows and waits patiently for the man to explain. If there's one thing he's learned about Jin Ling (and apparently also his father) it's that sometimes you need to wait for them to speak up. Pressuring won't do anything.

When they hit the dirt floor again, that's when Jin Zixuan is finally speaking up,

“Accompany us to Yiling,”

Ouyang Zizhen holds his breath,

“Wei Wuxian is the one who will know how to send you back.”

Chapter End Notes

LSZ: If I had a nickel for every time I re-met my pseudo father figure and didn't recognize his face, I'd have two nickels. Which isn't a lot, but it's weird that it happened twice.

*Insert here a joke about how all the kids have different mentalities regarding preserving the timeline.

(F in the chat for poor LJY who's just stressing himself out for no reason T-T)

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

and then they all must say goodbye

Chapter Notes

stop looking at the chapter count, please, i'm begging

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wei Wuxian admits that he feels reluctant to send Lan Sizhui back home.

For completely selfish reasons, too—He just feels he'll miss the boy after he's gone.

Which is ridiculous. Wei Wuxian has his own Lan Sizhui who just goes by the name A-Yuan here. And in the future Wei Wuxian will get Lan Sizhui back, so it's not as if he's losing the boy.

Still.

Wei Wuxian thinks he'll still miss Lan Sizhui.

It's ridiculous because he's only known the boy for one afternoon, and now he'll have to send him back to his own timeline. Apparently, one afternoon is enough time for Wei Wuxian to become attached.

However, to be fair, it's one afternoon + all the years he's known A-Yuan.

So.

More than one afternoon, technically.

Wei Wuxian glances over at said boy.

He has stopped crying by now, but still he looks conflicted. Almost as if at any moment he might change his mind, and bolt up the Burial Mounds to go find his family.

And Wei Wuxian, as much as he would like that to happen, knows it would be better for the kid to not. Would be easier for him if he didn't.

So, he opens his mouth without really any plan of action in hopes of distracting Lan Sizhui,

“I’ll miss you,” he says, and then startles because, *that wasn’t what he meant to say?*

Lan Sizhui looks up and away from the ground. He doesn’t even look shocked that Wei Wuxian said that.

Internally, Wei Wuxian berates himself. Lan Sizhui has his own version of Wei Wuxian—his own Xian-gege. Seemingly a better version of him, too, if it’s a version that Lan Zhan could be in love with.

Lan Sizhui, in short, will not miss him. Lan Sizhui *already has* a Wei Wuxian that’s probably missing him right now.

“I mean—“ he starts to correct himself, but Lan Sizhui cuts him off,

“I’ll miss you, too.”

And then he smiles. Smiles over the tear tracks that still stain his cheeks.

A relieved laugh breaks out of Wei Wuxian. His chest feels lighter at those simple words.

“Really?” He breathes in between laughs, “How does that make any sense?”

Lan Sizhui’s small smile grows into something a little bit brighter, but he just looks at Wei Wuxian silently.

His gaze seems to be trying to leave no room for questions— *Yes, really. I will miss you*, it says

Wei Wuxian shakes his head while smiling,

“You’ll still have me. *I’ll* still have *you*. How could we possibly miss each other?”

Lan Sizhui shrugs, and says simply,

“I think I would miss any version of you no matter how many I already had, if that makes sense.”

And it *shouldn’t*, but somehow it does.

Wei Wuxian reaches out one hand and lightly rubs one thumb over the boy’s cheek,

“Yea, I’d miss every version of you, too.”

Lan Sizhui’s smile turns smaller—softer.

“Now,”

Wei Wuxian takes his hand back so that he can untie the robe currently draped over his shoulder,

“I should give this back so you can go home.”

He starts to slide the heavy robe over and off one of his shoulders, but quickly, paler hands are coming up to stop his own.

Lan Sizhui takes the robe Wei Wuxian had been trying to shrug off, and repositions it back over his shoulders. When it's put in place, he starts to re-tie it with a determined expression on his face.

“Keep it,” is all he says.

Wei Wuxian looks at the stubborn, little frown on his face, sees the way he gently, but firmly, ties the strings back together, and he smiles.

“Okay,” he says repressing a full-on grin, “I'll keep it to remember you by.”

Lan Sizhui nods once, firm and determined still.

Wei Wuxian really will be sad to see the boy go.

With a big sigh, he steels himself for the inevitable,

“So,” He starts, already wishing he didn't have to continue, “About the sending you home things,”

Lan Sizhui perks up a little at the intro to the new topic. Wei Wuxian continues,

“I can sense the resentment inside of you that's keeping you trapped here. It has settled in your lungs. I must assume you breathed something in?”

Lan Sizhui looks to be remembering something, before embarrassment takes over his face, and he nods a little shy,

“Yea... That, yea. That happened.”

Wei Wuxian nods at the confirmation,

“Eventually over time, you would have naturally breathed it all out after a few weeks. However,” And as he says the next part, Wei Wuxian wiggles his eyebrows erratically, “You have a handy dandy Demonic Cultivator at your service.”

Lan Sizhui smiles at his antics, but nods to beckon him into continuing,

“All I have to do is siphon all the energy out of your lungs at once, and you'll be back to your own time in no time!”

The boy nods at the explanation,

“Okay...”

He almost looks hesitant now, and he keeps glancing at Wei Wuxian as if the man will suddenly start siphoning the resentment out without warning.

It's amusing, if not a little concerning,

“What's up, radish? Is something wrong?”

Lan Sizhui holds eye contact for one second, two seconds, hesitates, then opens his mouth,

“Wei-qianbei...”

The man tilts his head to show he's listening.

“You're still gonna die soon, and I could tell you how to prevent it.”

Immediately, Wei Wuxian starts shushing him,

“Woa, woa, woa. What's this all of the sudden?”

“It's just—I can't stand here knowing what I know and not, and not, and not—“

Wei Wuxian shushes him again before the boy can work himself up into an anxious storm.

“Hey, hey, hey. Don't forget to breathe over there, yea?”

The boy takes a deep breath, but looks imploringly into Wei Wuxian's eyes as he does so.

Wei Wuxian heaves a big sigh at the look,

“Sizhui, when I said I didn't want to know the future, I meant it. Nothing can be changed, I feel certain of it.

“As long as my future has you, I don't want to risk messing it up, okay?”

Lan Sizhui closes his eyes and shakes his head,

“But, Wei-qianbei... You have no idea... You could fix it. I know you could, somehow.”

Wei Wuxian shakes his head,

“I chose the dark, narrow path. There's no turning away from it now. All I can do is continue.”

The boy opens his eyes. They're filled with both sorrow and restraint.

“Will you just... do one thing for me?”

Wei Wuxian keeps his mouth shut, knowing better than to agree to that before hearing what it is.

“Would you ask Hanguang-jun what he thinks about your Demonic Cultivation?”

This provokes a snort from Wei Wuxian,

“Kid,” He says, trying not to scoff *too* much, “I *know* what he thinks about my cultivation. He *hates* —“

“ *Please* .”

The words pause in Wei Wuxian’s mouth.

“Please ask him *why* he hates it.”

And to Wei Wuxian, this feels like a dumb question. Why does anyone hate Demonic Cultivation? Why does anyone hate what they fear? These are essentially the same question.

“Please,” Lan Sizhui asks one more time, and Wei Wuxian, after a moment of pause, nods.

“Okay, yea. Sure, kid. I’ll ask him what he thinks.”

Lan Sizhui nods, seemingly satisfied.

“Okay. That might be enough to fix things.”

An abrupt laugh forces its way from Wei Wuxian’s throat.

“What?” He says over disbelieving laughter.

But now Sizhui is the one shaking his head and refusing,

“Nothing, nothing, Wei-qianbei.”

Then he smiles brighter than the sun, and says,

“I’m ready, then. To go home.”

Across from Wei Wuxian on the bench, the boy slides backwards a tad, and straightens his back. Sitting up straight like this, he’s actually almost Wei Wuxian’s height.

This pings something in Wei Wuxian’s memory.

“Sizhui,” he says seriously. The boy looks at him.

“Earlier, outside that tavern...”

Lan Sizhui cocks his head to the side in confusion, but Wei Wuxian carries on gravely—The subject matter being too important to take lightly,

“...You said I was too tall to be the Yiling Patriarch.”

His A-Yuan has the nerve to start giggling after his face clears of its previous confusion,

“Oh,” he’s saying through giggles, but can’t seem to get more words out.

“Hey, come on now,” Wei Wuxian does *not* whine, “this is very serious.”

He looks imploringly at Sizhui, who finally clears his throat and tries to get himself back under control,

“Yea,” he laughs one more time, “Mo-qianbei was quite a short Demonic Cultivator.”

Mo-qianbei is obviously implied to be the man who summons Wei Wuxian back from the dead. The man who gave up his body for the future Wei Wuxian.

As the Wei Wuxian of this present time, he makes a small mental note to both pay this Mo-qianbei his respects, and perhaps find him to force some growth supplements down his throat.

He’s sure it can’t be hard to find him. Probably.

Wei Wuxian tables that thought for later, and stands up peppier than he feels. As he does so, he beckons Lan Sizhui to follow. The other complies, still smiling a little.

Now that they’re both standing across from each other, it is evident how tall A-Yuan will become. The Lan Sizhui before him now stands only a little bit below Wei Wuxian when his back is perfectly straight.

“You’re so tall...”

But it’s not Wei Wuxian who says it—it’s Lan Sizhui who is currently marveling at the man as if *he* were the child who had grown up unexpectedly.

The situation is so ridiculous that Wei Wuxian can’t help but throw his head back and laugh.

“*I’m* the one that’s tall here?”

It’s ridiculous that his A-Yuan could be before him as he is now. Ridiculous that Wei Wuxian could one day live in a body that’s not his own.

“Come here, you silly boy.”

It’s ridiculous, Wei Wuxian thinks while holding this boy he essentially *just met* in his arms, that he’s gonna miss Lan Sizhui so much.

His A-Yuan has grown so much that his head just barely tucks under Wei Wuxian’s chin now.

“This is weird,” Sizhui’s muffled voice speaks into Wei Wuxian’s chest.

Wei Wuxian tips his head to the side, refusing to let go even if the boy thinks it is weird,

“What is?”

“I’m not used to hugging you when you’re taller than me.”

“...”

“It’s nice.”

Wei Wuxian’s next chuckle sounds a little wet.

“Yea, well I’m not used to hugging such a tall version of you either.”

Finally, Wei Wuxian steps back. Looks this boy in the eye for the last time.

He’s not sure he’s ready to say goodbye.

“Now,” He says, pushing through his tightened throat, “You’ve given me a lot of advice.”

Lan Sizhui nods emphatically, while also wiping at his eyes harshly and quickly.

Wei Wuxian puts both hands on the boy’s shoulders, and *really* looks at him,

“So, I have one request for you before I send you back.”

The other looks at him, eyes red but also curious. He looks as if he is holding his breath.

“Tell your Wei Wuxian to find a stepping stool.”

Lan Sizhui’s eyebrows knit together, confused at the request. Lightly, Wei Wuxian moves his hand to brush the hair falling in front of the boy’s face back and out of the way.

“Our A-Yuan needs to be hugged by a taller Wei Wuxian every once and awhile,” He says, but what he means is—

Goodbye.

Take care, my sweet boy. Eat lots of food. Meet lots of friends.

Be kind to your Hanguang-jun, and remind your Wei Wuxian what a blessing it is to have someone as precious as an A-Yuan in his life.

—This is what he means.

— — —

Wei Wuxian hadn't expected to see his Shijie in Yiling today.

He doesn't really expect to see his Shijie in Yiling *ever*. The first time she visited had already been surprising enough.

This is why, when he sees her walking down the street—only an incense stick's worth of time having passed since sending Lan Sizhui home—he simply believes he must be hallucinating.

Shijie is not in Yiling. Shijie is in Lanling.

The stress of the day must be getting to him, why else would he see his sister standing before him now? Sending Sizhui home must have taken a harsher toll on him than he had originally thought.

"A-Xian!" The hallucination calls out to him, all bright smiles and gentle hand waving.

"Shijie," he says weakly, for what a cruel hallucination this is.

The hallucination walks up to him, and the only thing Wei Wuxian wishes to do is collapse into his Shijie's arms—Fake or not.

She holds up her arms, and giving into the urge, Wei Wuxian falls into them.

What greets him is a pair of incredibly solid arms.

Wei Wuxian yelps and jumps back as if he were burned,

"Wha—! Shijie! What!"

Jiang Yanli, not, *apparently*, a hallucination, lets out a small laugh,

"A-Xian, are you not happy to see me?"

She's playfully pouting as she says it, and Wei Wuxian can't help the gigantic grin that splits his face.

"Shijie, no! I am incredibly happy to see you!"

As he says this, he rushes back into her arms. This time content in the knowledge that he's not going insane.

Suddenly, he's pulling back so that he can hold the woman at arm's length,

"What are you doing traveling! You shouldn't be traveling! You're *pregnant*, Shijie!"

"Actually—" She starts, but gets cut off rather quickly.

"So, he's one of the people treating you like a baby now, huh?"

Wei Wuxian physically recoils at the completely unexpected and new voice,

“Wah—! What—Who—?”

He whirls toward the noise only to jump even harder again,

“Peacock—!” He shouts in alarm—

—But it’s not the peacock?

It’s... a fifteen year old boy.

Wei Wuxian places a hand to his chest to mitigate his racing heart in some capacity.

“Oh my god, Shijie, who is this brat?” He’s saying while taking in deep breaths, hand still placed over his heart.

Looking over at Jiang Yanli, he finds that she is covering her silent laughter with a hand,

“Be nice, A-Xian,” she reprimands while smiling.

“Yea, who you calling a brat, *idiot* .”

Wei Wuxian makes a face at that, “Excuse me—“

Jiang Yanli places a hand on top of the unknown boy’s head, and instantaneously, he loses all the pomp and haughtiness that he had previously possessed.

It’s like it drains out of him.

“Now, you be nice as well,” Jiang Yanli laughs, “and let me properly introduce you two.”

“A-Xian, this is Jin Zizhen. Jin Zizhen, this is my brother, Wei Wuxian.”

Wei Wuxian eyes the brat suspiciously.

The brat scoffs loudly,

“Yea, we’re well-acquainted in the future. I already know he’s an idiot.”

Jiang Yanli winces a little,

“Probably not the best way to introduce the topic but, A-Xian, Zizhen here is—“

“*From the future* ...” Wei Wuxian speaks at the same time as his Shijie.

Both the boy and Jiang Yanli look shocked to hear Wei Wuxian say it,

“Why aren’t you surprised?” The boy is saying while crossing his arms across his chest with a huff.

It looks like he’s trying to hide genuine curiosity behind a huffy attitude.

It doesn't work very well.

"I just..."

Wei Wuxian trails off and thinks about Lan Sizhui. The way the boy had smiled at him one last time.

I think I would miss any version of you no matter how many I already had.

"...I just sent Lan Sizhui home."

Jiang Yanli tips her head at the unfamiliar name, but the boy jerks with a start,

"Sizhui!" He exclaims, looking slightly panicked, "He was here? What did he tell you! Did he tell you anything!"

The boy reaches out and grabs the front of Wei Wuxian's robes, as if he plans to shake information out of him should he refuse to speak.

His eyes are widened and searching in his panic.

Wei Wuxian eyes the boy who calls himself Zizhen, but looks like a peacock. His eyes shift over to Jiang Yanli, but she stands watching as if nothing is wrong.

It is hard to tell if she has realized the boy's lie or not.

Wei Wuxian looks back at the boy who couldn't be anyone but a fifteen year old Jin Ling, sees how his eyes are still filled with panic and terror, and figures the boy must have a good reason.

For now, Wei Wuxian thinks he can let it go.

"He told me he was night hunting with his friends, of course!" Wei Wuxian claps his hands together and smiles at the boy,

"He didn't give any names, but you must be one of my A-Yuan's good friends, yes, Jin Zizhen?"

Jin Ling's shoulders relax and his face clears of distress.

"Oh," he breathes out in relief, "That's good..."

Jiang Yanli, who has been silently side lined, steps forward to speak up again,

"And this Lan Sizhui is...?"

Wei Wuxian lets a bittersweet smile take over his face,

"Oh, Shijie, he's the best."

Her eyebrows furrow even harder even as she smiles in an amused way.

“What?” She asks.

“Lan Sizhui is his stupid son.”

Jin Ling huffs as if Wei Wuxian were being ridiculous for not answering, but Jiang Yanli shrieks at the same time that Wei Wuxian yelps.

“*A-Xian* ! My A-Xian will have a child in the future?”

“He’s not my *son*! ”

All that his efforts earn is an eye roll from Jin Ling,

“He’s *basically* your son, yours and Hanguang-jun’s.”

Jiang Yanli pauses her joyous claps, and frowns slightly in confusion,

“You and... the Second Jade of Lan?” She’s asking as she turns to look at Wei Wuxian.

“No! No! Oh my god, no!” He’s almost shouting at this point.

“What do you mean, *no* !” Jin Ling actually *is* shouting, “What? The almighty Hanguang-jun isn’t good enough for you now?”

“ *What?* No! Of course that’s not what I’m saying!”

“Then good. You admit you want to marry him.”

Wei Wuxian squawks loudly,

“I did not say—!”

“Great, you’re stupid even in this time.”

“For what it’s worth,” Jiang Yanli is suddenly cutting in with a small smile, “I think you and Hanguang-jun would make a very handsome couple.”

Wei Wuxian feels something crumbling inside of him at that,

“Shijie...” he whines, incapable of withstanding this teasing for even a second longer.

“Ok, ok,” She’s saying as she laughs, “Zizhen, dear, I don’t think my brother can handle hearing about the future.

“No matter how interesting it seems it’s going to be,” she tacks on with a wink sent in Wei Wuxian’s direction.

“Hey!”

Jin Ling grumbles and gripes a little bit, but ultimately he lets it go.

“Lan Sizhui,” Wei Wuxian says firmly, face still flaming a little in embarrassment, “Is the older version of the little boy currently living on the Burial Mounds with me.”

The laughter on Jiang Yanli’s face fades along with the sneer on Jin Ling’s. They both look a little somber at the reminder of Wei Wuxian’s current lifestyle.

“You should’ve seen him, Shijie,” Wei Wuxian is continuing on, oblivious to the slight mood shift, “He grew up so big!”

His Shijie steps forward to tug at the robe Lan Sizhui had left around his shoulders.

“He must’ve been the one to give you this?”

Jin Ling turns a more calculating eye on the pure, white robe, and nods as if he just realized something,

“That *is* his outer robe...” and then quieter he mumbles under his breath, “I thought Hanguang-jun must’ve given you that.”

Pointedly, Wei Wuxian ignores the comment,

“Shijie, he was so nice. A real polite young man. He grew up so well.”

Jiang Yanli finishes straightening the Lan robe, and looks up at him with a smile,

“I’m so glad, A-Xian.”

Jin Ling shuffles his feet around in the background, but Wei Wuxian couldn’t care less. After months and months, he is finally a recipient of his Shijie’s warm smile again.

It has really been such a long time.

“So... you two are really close then?” Jin Ling says, breaking the moment.

Wei Wuxian looks over at the boy to see he looks mildly conflicted at their proximity to each other.

His Shijie smiles and shakes her head, as if the question itself is dumb.

“Of course. He’s my brother.”

Another conflicted look crosses the boy’s face.

He opens his mouth once, before closing it again. Seemingly deciding not to say whatever he was about to.

“Okay, then,” Is what he ends up saying, looking down at the dirt as he does.

Wei Wuxian has no earthly clue what is possibly going to happen in the future to cause that kind of a reaction.

He's not entirely sure he wants to find out.

One glance towards his Shijie reveals she also looks confused, but seemingly has no intentions to press the boy.

"So, you sent Lan Sizhui home?" Jin Ling says, tracing patterns in the dirt with his shoe.

Wei Wuxian nods slowly, still feeling slightly wrong-footed,

"... I did."

Jiang Yanli interjects with a bright smile,

"I told you my brother could fix your problem. He can be very smart for a three year old," To emphasize her point, she ruffles Wei Wuxian's hair with her hand.

Jin Ling glances up, and his face shows only confusion at the joke. Wei Wuxian, however, instantly brightens.

"Of course, Xian-Xian can be smart sometimes," He's saying without hesitation, easily falling into their old bit.

"Send me home, then."

Wei Wuxian's smile freezes.

"Oooo, so demanding," he's saying sarcastically, while viciously biting back insults that mostly begin and end with the word peacock.

"What's the magic word?" Wei Wuxian sing songs.

Jin Ling grinds his teeth together,

" *Please* ."

"Such a good boy," He moves to rustle the younger boy's hair, but Jin Ling practically skitters away while snarling,

" *Stay away from my hair* ."

" *Shijie* , your brat is being mean to me," he whines.

When he glances at his Shijie, her face is hard to read.

She's smiling, but it almost looks sorrowful.

"A-Xian, play nice," She says quietly, but never takes her eyes off of Jin Ling.

Slowly, as if taking her time, Jiang Yanli approaches Jin Ling.

“Jin Zizhen,” she says around a smile that looks a little watery, “my sweet boy, won’t you let me say goodbye before you leave?”

All traces of hostility instantaneously evaporate from the boy’s face.

“Madame Jin,” he says, sounding shaky.

In contrast to his reaction to Wei Wuxian before, Jin Ling allows Jiang Yanli to reach a delicate hand up and stroke his hair.

“Before you go, I would just like you to know that you are a very kind young master.”

Wei Wuxian watches closely the way that Jin Ling’s mouth quivers at the words.

“You must be an inspiration to your generation, your mother must be so very proud of you.”

Jin Ling’s head drops.

“...What if she’s not?” He asks quietly.

Jiang Yanli looks at him sorrowfully once again.

Gentle in every move, she beckons the boy to lift his chin up. She holds his face in place so that she can say what she says next while looking into his eyes imploringly,

“Jin-gongzi.”

Now that his face has become visible, Wei Wuxian can see the way two streams of tears flow down Jin Ling’s cheeks.

And it’s odd because, if Wei Wuxian didn’t know any better, he would say it seems almost as if Jin Ling has never met the woman before him?

Like he’s never been the recipient of such kind treatment...

Oh, Wei Wuxian thinks, feeling a little numb inside.

His Shijie is going to die in the future.

“Shijie...” Wei Wuxian whispers, too quiet for either of them to hear.

They both, predictably, don’t even glance at him.

“Any mother would be proud to have a son like you,” Jiang Yanli says, to which the boy promptly bursts into uncontrollable tears.

He is immediately wrapped up into a hug.

Watching the way his Shijie clings on to the boy tightly, seeing how she strokes his hair and closes her eyes in anguish—It’s clear that Wei Wuxian’s new epiphany is also obvious to her.

His Shijie knows exactly who she's hugging right now. His Shijie has realized she is going to die. Apparently soon.

Wei Wuxian brings a hand up to cover his eyes, and takes deep shaky breaths in.

Maybe he had told Lan Sizhui that he does not want to change the future, that he should just let things occur how they had already happened. And maybe he had believed that to be true at the time. Now, however, he only knows one thing.

He will not let his Shijie die. Out of the question.

"Zizhen," Wei Wuxian calls into the silence.

The boy is still wrapped up in his mother's arms, perhaps for the last time ever. He looks up when called, however, and Wei Wuxian can see clearly how tear tracks run down his cheeks.

Jin Ling's face has exactly the same anguish that Lan Sizhui's had worn when contemplating what it might be like to leave a family he won't be allowed to have in the future. When Sizhui had contemplated how hard it might be to have to give something like that up.

Wei Wuxian feels his eyes water at the thought.

"Are you ready?"

Jin Ling's hands curl themselves harder into Jiang Yanli's robes. He looks like he would rather do anything, *would rather die*, than let her go.

Wei Wuxian's gaze does not falter.

And then the boy lets go.

He takes a step back and away from the mother he was never allowed. He turns and looks at Wei Wuxian. He cries silently the entire time.

"I'm ready," he says, clearly not ready.

But it's not about being ready, it has never been about being ready. It's about *needing* to let go.

So, Wei Wuxian steps forward, each step feeling heavy with emotion.

When he steps in front of the boy, *his nephew*, he feels his throat tighten.

"This won't hurt one bit," he's saying, knowing he's lying his ass off. What he should say is this won't hurt *physically*. They both know it's going to hurt emotionally, "I'll just have to siphon the resentful energy out of your lungs."

Jin Ling nods, his eyes inexplicably filled with unending trust that Wei Wuxian has no idea how he earned.

“Quick, easy, painless, okay?”

Jin Ling nods, still wiping furiously at his eyes.

Wei Wuxian eyes the boy, and watches him try to stop the flow of his tears fruitlessly.

Gently as he can, he grabs the boy by both shoulders,

“You’ll be okay.”

Jin Ling looks at him with all that trust still brimming in his eyes. There’s not even a hint of uncertainty that Wei Wuxian might be lying to him.

It’s bizarre for Wei Wuxian to see. Especially when so few people are left in this world who trust him.

“I know, Wei-qianbei,” he replies, “I’m going to be okay.”

— — —

“Wei-qianbei! Wei-qianbei! Wei-qianbei!”

Wei Wuxian has barely enough time to turn and look for who could possibly be calling him in such a way, before he gets an armful of teenage boy.

For the third time today.

“Wei-qianbei! I can’t believe it’s you! You’re so tall, wow!” He’s saying, all while hugging on tightly to Wei Wuxian.

From beside Wei Wuxian, he can hear Jiang Yanli laughing in genuine amusement. As if Wei Wuxian being constantly bombarded by teenage boys is funny to her.

Which, also, why do they all insist on addressing him as qianbei? It’s unending.

The boy pulls back, but continues bouncing on his toes in excitement,

“Look at you, Wei-qianbei!” He’s saying, all bright smiles and big hand gestures, “I can’t believe it’s you!”

And Wei Wuxian thinks this is getting a little out of hand, yea?

How many kids is he gonna have to send back to the future today?

“Hey. Kid. Slow down, and breathe.”

Because yes, this new kid is breathing quite heavily. Almost as if he had sprinted for hours just to get here.

“First off, who are you? And how do you know I’m your Wei-qianbei, hm?”

Wei Wuxian hasn’t had quite enough time since sending Jin Ling back to his own time to explain to his Shijie everything that happened with Lan Sizhui. Perhaps only five minutes had passed before this new kid had come and decided hugging (tackling) was the first thing he must do.

But at the very least, five minutes had been enough time for him to explain why Lan Sizhui could not recognize him at first.

So, why could this new kid recognize him instantly?

“Oh!” The new boy is saying between deep breaths, “Jin-qianbei pointed you out for me.”

And then he points one hand down the street in the direction that he had come running from.

Far in the distance, Jin Zixuan approaches at a much slower pace.

Ugh .

“Gross,” Wei Wuxian says while making a face.

Lightly from beside him, his Shijie smacks his arm,

“A-Xian, I said be nice earlier.”

Jin Zixuan joins them in pursed lip silence. Wei Wuxian raises one unimpressed eyebrow.

Stiffly, his Shijie’s husband bows to him. Wei Wuxian doesn’t even bother to return it.

Then the man almost instantaneously starts ignoring him.

“A-Li,” he says, turning much too comfortably towards his Shijie if Wei Wuxian could have a say on that, “I didn’t realize you would be here, what a pleasant surprise.”

Jiang Yanli smiles, and for the first time since Jin Ling left, it is a smile without any traces of sorrow.

“It’s kind of a long story, I’ll let you know after you tell me why you’re here?”

Jin Zixuan nods very seriously, and then places both hands on the unknown boy’s shoulder to steer him in front of himself.

“I must present to you both, Ouyang Zizhen.”

Jiang Yanli startles at the name, and Wei Wuxian feels his mouth drop open.

“*You’re Zizhen?*” He’s exclaiming without even thinking.

The boy smiles with wide eyes, seemingly thoroughly confused,

“What?”

“Oh my god,” Wei Wuxian says before dissolving into a fit of laughter, “No way that boy used his friend’s actual name!”

Jiang Yanli is laughing lightly alongside Wei Wuxian’s full guffaws.

“I’m sorry, what’s going on?” Ouyang Zizhen is still asking with that confused smile plastered on his face. Neither party is capable of answering in their current state.

“Please, A-Li, Wei Wuxian, I must tell you this boy, he’s...”

Jiang Yanli puts a placating hand on her husband’s shoulder,

“He’s from the future, yes love, we know,” she says, still laughing a little.

The peacock looks startled at the revelation,

“You know?” He’s asking bewildered.

Jiang Yanli nods kindly, “We’ve each had our own teenager to deal with today.”

Jin Zixuan’s face brightens at the explanation,

“Oh,” He’s saying, clearly happy to now understand, “They must’ve been Zizhen’s friends then.”

Hearing the name sends Wei Wuxian into another fit of laughter. Ouyang Zizhen seems intent on pressing him for why his name is so amusing to the older man, however Jin Zixuan only has eyes for his wife.

“A-Li,” he’s saying, voice full of wonderment, “this boy here, he knows our son.”

Wei Wuxian lets out another loud laugh,

“No shit he knows your son!” He’s saying while laughing.

Jin Zixuan furrows his brow, and looks to his wife for answers.

Jiang Yanli smiles knowingly, and says simply,

“I just met our son.”

Wei Wuxian points a shaky finger in Ouyang Zizhen's direction,

"He used your name as a cover name!"

"My name?!" The boy shrieks, looking both honored and confused.

"He called himself Jin Zizhen! Oh my god, this is amazing. I wish he were here so I could make fun of him to his face!"

"A-Li, you met Jin Ling?"

Jiang Yanli is nodding with a small, sad smile on her face.

"I did."

Jin Zixuan looks positively stunned, as if a small breeze could knock him over,

"What's he like?" He whispers reverently.

Jiang Yanli rubs a familiar hand up and down Jin Zixuan's arm, then opens her mouth to say,

"He's a lot like Jiang Cheng, actually."

Wei Wuxian bursts out into laughter hearing that,

"Oh my god, he was, wasn't he! I was just trying to think about who he reminded me of—"

"He's also like you, A-Xian."

Wei Wuxian stops his rant and looks at how his Shijie smiles at him when she says that.

Like it's a compliment to both Jin Ling and himself.

Uncharacteristically, he feels himself turn shy,

"Shijie..." He says, looking at the ground.

Jiang Yanli turns fully to face her husband,

"And he's also a lot like you."

Wei Wuxian almost wants to reject the placing of himself in a group that includes both *Jiang Cheng* and the *Peacock*. But when he looks at his Shijie's face, he bites his tongue.

Decides that now is not the time.

"He was really amazing, A-Xuan, I wish you could've met him."

"... He didn't tell you who he was?"

Ouyang Zizhen stands off to the side. On his face there is only written guilt.

Wei Wuxian cocks his head to the side,

“What’s up, kid? What’s that look on your face?”

Ouyang Zizhen shuffles his feet a few times and stares down at his hands,

“If he didn’t want Madame Jin to know, I feel bad that I might’ve blown his cover by coming here...” He says finally.

And later, his Shijie will tell him that his reaction to Ouyang Zizhen’s guilt was inappropriate, but for now, Wei Wuxian immediately bursts out laughing at the reminder of Jin Ling’s lie.

“Don’t worry, Zizhen,” he’s trying to say through hysterical laughter, “This is one of the funniest things that’s happened to me in a while.”

“Oh, shush, A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli places one reprimanding hand on Wei Wuxian’s shoulder, before she moves closer to the boy.

“Sweetie, Zizhen, hey,” She calls in order to get him to lift his gaze off of the ground, “I already knew before you came here.”

“Yea, cause that kid was a shit liar!” Wei Wuxian chimes in unhelpfully.

Jiang Yanli clears her throat loudly, and continues as if he had never spoken,

“I feel like a part of me knew from the moment I met him, so don’t feel like you accidentally ratted out your friend, okay?”

Zizhen looks up at Jiang Yanli, eyes practically shining in admiration,

“Really?” He asks shakily.

Jiang Yanli nods,

“Really. But you’re such a sweet boy to be so concerned about your friend like that. I’m happy Jin Ling has people like you to count on.”

Ouyang Zizhen looks like he’s bravely holding back tears, and almost shouts back,

“Thank you, Madame Jin! I will do my best to keep up the good work!”

Jiang Yanli smiles kindly, before gesturing towards Wei Wuxian,

“You can join your friends too, if you’d like. My brother already sent Lan Sizhui and Jin Ling home.”

“Lan Sizhui was here?”

Ouyang Zizhen darts his eyes from Jiang Yanli over to Wei Wuxian. Specifically to the Lan robe draped over his shoulders.

“Huh, that *is* Sizhui’s robe. I just figured Hanguang-jun gave it to you.”

Immediately, Wei Wuxian feels like his face catches fire,

“ *What* ! Why does everyone think that! I don’t—I—I—“

“It’s okay Wei-qianbei, I already told Jin Zixuan *everything* about the future. You and Hanguang-jun don’t need to hide your secret feelings for each other anymore!”

The boy says this as if it’s the best news in the world, but Wei Wuxian can only let out a noise that sounds like a screech.

“We don’t have—have *secret* feelings!”

Wait .

Wei Wuxian pauses, sobers for a second.

“You told the peacock *everything* ?”

Ouyang Zizhen nods very seriously.

“He gave very thorough explanations on each event that we should prevent within the near future. Including many deaths.”

When Jin Zixuan says this, he glances almost anxiously at Jiang Yanli. As if the woman might fall over and die right there.

Wei Wuxian feels himself breathe a sigh of relief.

Earlier, he had truly not wanted to know anything about the future. Certain it could only be gloom and doom for himself.

However, after meeting Jin Ling and realizing that the future might also be tragic for people like his Shijie...

...Well, he really regretted taking the ignorance is bliss option.

To hear that this boy, Ouyang Zizhen, had provided a full account of his own volition—it relieves Wei Wuxian, and he feels he can finally breathe properly again.

“Ouyang Zizhen,” Wei Wuxian speaks up, throat feeling a little tight.

“We must thank you for the invaluable service you’ve done for us. It was very wise of you to warn us,” Wei Wuxian finishes, and it’s probably the first thing he’s said to the boy that wasn’t a joke.

The boy’s eyes take back on that shiny admiring quality, but now it’s directed at *him* .

“ *Wei-qianbei!* ” Is all he manages, before he runs over and is once again hugging him.

Wei Wuxian thinks he's never hugged this many teenagers before in his life. What must he be like in the future for all of them to feel this close with him?

Slowly, Wei Wuxian relaxes and lets the boy hug him, hesitantly, he brings a hand up and lays it on the top of Zizhen's head.

"There, there, yes. There, there."

The boy pulls away, a happy smile cracking his face down the middle,

"It's so weird hugging such a tall version of you, Wei-qianbei!"

This provokes a snort out of Wei Wuxian,

"Yea, believe it or not, I've actually already heard that today."

Zizhen's smile widens, and Wei Wuxian feels maybe this kid is starting to grow on him, too.

Which is bad, because he needs to send him home. So, pushing those feelings down, Wei Wuxian clears his throat,

"Alright, kid, you ready to go home?"

Vigorously, the boy nods, looking very excited about the prospect.

"So, all I have to do is siphon the resentful energy out—"

"Wait!" Zizhen cuts him off, looking like he suddenly remembered something.

Wei Wuxian blinks at the sudden interruption, but motions for the kid to go on.

"I forgot to tell you one thing," He says, looking directly at Jin Zixuan now.

Jin Zixuan, stoic as ever, only crinkles his eyebrows together,

"What could you have forgotten?"

"This is going to sound weird, okay?" He starts, glancing between all three of them to gauge reactions.

Wei Wuxian feels his own eyebrows furrow at the introduction, but doesn't interrupt.

"But please believe me when I say—You need to go to Nie Huaisong. You need to tell him everything I told you, specifically the parts about his brother. He *will* know what to do."

"Nie-xiong?" Wei Wuxian says, unable to stop his natural reaction.

Ouyang Zizhen nods,

"He's probably gonna say that he doesn't know what to do, but believe me, this will only help you guys."

Wei Wuxian glances over at his Shijie (and then also reluctantly at the Peacock) to try and see what they might be thinking.

They both seem just as bewildered as Wei Wuxian.

“...Okay... We’ll do that, Zizhen,” Wei Wuxian finally says, even if he’s a little hesitant to believe the boy.

But what reason would he have to send them off on pointless missions?

“Okay, good. Now you can send me home.”

Ouyang Zizhen is smiling. It’s hard to tell if it’s from his successfully conveyed message, or if it’s just that the boy is never not smiling.

Wei Wuxian certainly doesn’t know which it is.

“You don’t want me to explain what I’m about to do to you?” Wei Wuxian asks, feeling wary of the unending trust this boy is putting into him,

“It’s gonna be Demonic Cultivation, you’re not a little concerned?”

Somehow, impossibly, Ouyang Zizhen’s smile grows wider.

“Of course not, Wei-qianbei!” He says,

“I always trust you.”

— — —

Wei Wuxian is not even surprised when there’s one waiting at home for him.

Of course there’s one waiting at home for him.

“...And who might you be?” Wei Wuxian asks, feeling over this already.

The Lan boy in front of him looks wary, his eyes narrowed in a suspicious manner. Behind him, he pushes A-Yuan to stand *further* away from Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian, seeing the boy has no intention to introduce himself, rolls his eyes and switches tactics,

“Wen Qing, who is this kid?”

All five of them—the Lan boy, Wen Qing, Wen Ning, A-Yuan, and himself—are standing around a recently used-up fire pit. The burnt ashes from the night before create a perfect circle for them all to huddle around as if there were still a fire.

Wen Qing also looks exasperated by the Lan boy’s behavior, so apparently killing two birds with one stone, she snaps,

“*Lan Jingyi*. What is wrong with you?”

A-Yuan giggles wildly as he tries to rush towards Wei Wuxian’s legs, only to keep getting stopped by ~~the boy’s~~ Lan Jingyi’s arms keeping him back. The three year old seems to think they’re playing a fun game.

Lan Jingyi does not look like he’s playing a game.

Almost *glaring* at Wei Wuxian, the boy finally speaks up,

“Wen-guniang, that is *not* Wei Wuxian!”

For the second time in the last minute, Wei Wuxian feels his eyes roll,

“*Oh my god.*”

“I don’t know who that is! Some kind of Demonic Cultivator imposter, but he’s tricking you guys! Probably has the real Wei Wuxian trapped somewhere—!”

“*Kid.*” Wei Wuxian cuts in abruptly, “You really think someone could trap *me.*”

“You’re way too tall to be Wei-qianbei! You won’t trick me, I know what he looks like!”

This again.

Wen Qing narrows her eyes,

“You think I don’t know what Wei Wuxian looks like? *You think I just forgot?*”

Lan Jingyi shrinks backwards, and Wei Wuxian thinks *good, he’s still got some brain cells in there.*

“Lan Jingyi.”

The boy turns to Wei Wuxian when called. He still, however, actively prevents A-Yuan from running over.

“I’m in my old body.”

It's weird, somehow, to suddenly feel like the expert on the future to someone who is *from the future*.

My old body, he had said. As if that's what it is—old. Not present.

Which isn't right. This body is his body. Wei Wuxian doesn't even know what his future body looks like. This body should be his *only* body, and yet in the course of one afternoon that has already changed.

Somewhere in all of this, his body had become the old version. The original version. The first version.

Lan Jingyi's mouth hangs open for a second, before he snaps it shut,

“... Wei-qianbei?” He casts out in an uncertain manner.

Wei Wuxian just raises one eyebrow sarcastically.

And then Lan Jingyi is lighting up like a firecracker.

“Oh my goodness, I'm so stupid! Of course it would be your old body! What was I thinking?”

Then he turns a more knowledgeable eye onto Wei Wuxian,

“Wow! Look at you! I never thought I'd ever be able to see this. I mean, people always said you were scary, but wow, yea. *Scary*.”

Is Wei Wuxian supposed to feel offended at that? He doesn't know.

In Lan Jingyi's distraction, A-Yuan finally gets the chance to sprint full speed into his Xian-gege's legs.

“Xian-gege!” He shrieks happily.

“A-Yuan,” he replies, feeling a little breathless.

He doesn't hesitate to bend down and scoop the child up. When he holds him up for inspection he can see the traces of the older Lan Sizhui in A-Yuan's face.

Can see the traces of the young man A-Yuan will become.

“Xian-gege! Guess what?”

“What is it, my little radish?”

“Poor-gege is from the future! He says I'm gonna be super tall one day. Taller than even Xian-gege!”

Wei Wuxian pauses.

“Hey now, radish,” he jokingly reprimands the child, “You shouldn’t go around believing everything you hear, okay?”

A-Yuan looks confused at that, and says,

“Is Poor-gege lying then?”

Wei Wuxian smiles, feeling a little bittersweet,

“Well, it’s a little more complicated than your Poor-gege realizes, but yea. You grew up to be taller than me in the future.”

A-Yuan laughs up a riot at the news.

Over his head, Wei Wuxian makes eye contact with Wen Qing. She is sending him a concerned eyebrow furrow, however, all he can return is a small head shake.

I’ll tell you later , is what he means.

Wen Qing gives a single head nod back.

“Xian-gege got this from Rich-gege?”

Wei Wuxian is startled back into the present moment, and looks to see how A-Yuan tugs at the white robe around his shoulders.

For the first time today, the insinuation that Lan Zhan must have been the one to gift him the robe doesn’t immediately fill Wei Wuxian up to the brim with embarrassment.

“No, I didn’t,” Wei Wuxian says, reaching up to pet the boy’s hair while he sits in his arms, “Actually, a nice young man named Lan Sizhui gave it to me.”

From across the old fire pit, Lan Jingyi shouts in alarm.

“ *You met Sizhui?* ”

Wei Wuxian looks up at him.

Jingyi’s mouth is hanging open in alarm, and Wei Wuxian can’t help but laugh at his expression,

“Oh, I met more than just Sizhui, little Lan.”

Jingyi’s face grows more and more concerned the longer Wei Wuxian continues to speak.

“At first it was only Sizhui, but then it was Jin Ling too, then Ouyang Zizhen, and now we have, well, you.”

“ *But the timeline!* ” Lan Jingyi blurts out, looking dangerously close to passing out, “Please tell me they didn’t tell you anything about the future!”

Wei Wuxian cackles again,

“Oh, kid. Ouyang Zizhen told the Peaco— *I mean, um*, Jin Zixuan everything.”

If Jingyi had a weaker golden core, he might *actually* be at risk of fainting.

“Everything?” Wen Qing speaks up.

She looks as if she’s trying to play it cool, but Wei Wuxian can hear the clear interest in her voice.

“Everything,” Wei Wuxian confirms.

Wen Qing is giving him a pointed look, to which Wei Wuxian breathes a small laugh,

“We have a few things we need to start fixing within the next coming months.”

And then taking pity on the Lan boy who looks like he might hyperventilate any second now, Wei Wuxian turns to look him in the eye,

“Your timeline is safe, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Lan Jingyi’s eyes are bugging out of his head in his own distress,

“...Are you sure about that?”

Wei Wuxian nods in an amused way,

“Your friend, Zizhen, explained how he feels assured that our timelines have only diverged into two. Changing things here will change nothing for you—”

Lan Jingyi doesn’t even hesitate for a moment longer before he’s yelling,

“ *Don’t attend Jin Ling’s 100th day celebration!* ”

Then he turns wildly towards Wen Qing and grips her shoulders with a familiarity that Wei Wuxian can’t assume the woman appreciates.

“ *Don’t sacrifice yourself to the Jin, no matter what! They’re lying, they won’t keep their promise!* ”

Turning back to Wei Wuxian, Jingyi starts to rush towards him, arms outstretched without a doubt in an attempt to grip his shoulders too,

“ *Don’t* —“ he starts, but Wei Wuxian cuts him off. Grabs *him* by the shoulders.

“ *Kid* . Take a breath.”

Harshly and shakily, Jingyi sucks in a rough-sounding breath at the instruction.

“Wei-qianbei,” he’s trying to speak over the breath he’s sucking in, “This is really important —“

Wei Wuxian can’t help but start laughing at this ridiculous boy who does not act like a Lan at all.

“*Jingyi*, I told you. Ouyang Zizhen already told us everything. We’re gonna arrange time to plan out how we want to fix the future. *You’re okay.*”

His efforts are nice, sweet even, but they’re unnecessary.

Wei Wuxian doesn’t exactly know *why* Lan Jingyi had warned him against the things he had just tried to tell him about—Jin Zixuan had only given a brief overview where the main message consisted of *everything goes wrong*, before deciding he should share the rest at a later point in time.

Everyone had been too tired to disagree with that statement.

So the reasons why Lan Jingyi thinks Wei Wuxian should not attend Jin Ling’s 100th birthday celebration, or why the boy felt the need to tell Wen Qing to *not sacrifice herself*, are pretty unclear currently.

However, he’ll know soon enough. He and his Shijie have plans to return to Yiling within the next three days to discuss.

That would be enough for now.

Lan Jingyi has no need to stress himself out to the point that he just was about to, and the boy looks extremely relieved to hear Wei Wuxian’s words, too.

“Oh,” he breathes out, a relaxed smile already starting to form.

“Yea,” Wei Wuxian says, smiling back in return, “So, all you have to do is let me send you home now.”

Lan Jingyi nods enthusiastically, looking equally relieved to rely on Wei Wuxian as he had looked to learn Zizhen had already told them everything.

“Okay, that’s good, that’s good. Thank you, Wei-qianbei.”

Wei Wuxian startles to hear those words.

Thank you.

This is the first time he’s heard those words in awhile.

Shaking his head lightly, Wei Wuxian pats the boy’s shoulder agreeably,

“No need for thank yous, little Lan.”

Bizarrely, this prompts the boy to snort out a laugh.

“That’s what you’re always saying, Wei-qianbei, but what kind of Lan would I be if I forgot my manners?”

He says it with a wry smile on his face. As if it is an ironic thing he’s saying.

Wei Wuxian smirks back,

“Of course, of course, you’re right. Must not forget your Lan manners.”

And it’s not *making fun* of the rules. No, no, that would be *against* the rules. But it skirts a line, that’s for sure.

Abruptly, Wei Wuxian decides he is glad Sizhui has made friends with this particular Lan.

“You’re a good kid,” Wei Wuxian says decisively, “Now, goodbye forever.”

“ *Wait !*” Jingyi shouts, backing several paces away from Wei Wuxian, as if he’ll snap his fingers and remove the boy from existence.

“Hold on, hold on! Not yet.”

Wei Wuxian laughs brightly, never having intended to send the boy back unexpectedly and against his will like that,

“Whenever you’re ready then.”

Lan Jingyi lets go of the breath that he was holding,

“ *Thank you,* ” he whispers under his breath, and Wei Wuxian nods in joking acknowledgement.

And then Jingyi approaches A-Yuan, still perched in Wei Wuxian’s arms, very slowly.

“A-Yuan,” he says.

The boy looks over at him, and suddenly Wei Wuxian remembers—

This is Lan Jingyi. One of his A-Yuan’s best friends.

Except just as the name Lan Sizhui had been unfamiliar to Wei Wuxian, A-Yuan must be a name unfamiliar to Jingyi as well.

“I’m gonna miss you, A-Yuan,” the boy says, and Wei Wuxian feels his breath catch.

It’s exactly the same as when he himself had said goodbye to Lan Sizhui earlier in the day.

I’ll miss you.

I think I would miss any version of you no matter how many I already had, if that makes sense.

“Miss me? Where’s Poor-gege going?”

Lan Jingyi smiles, and it looks a little sad,

“I have to go back to my home.”

The boy blinks up at him, so Jingyi continues,

“But I just wanted you to know that I’m gonna miss you, okay?”

A-Yuan blinks again, comprehending the words at a slower pace.

And then a smile breaks across his face,

“I’ll miss Poor-gege, too!”

He says it like it’s a good thing, like it’s a compliment. And maybe to this boy, who’s been abandoned by most—passed around from Wen camp to Wen camp—it probably is a compliment.

To miss someone means they meant something to you. It means I enjoyed spending time with you, I wish we could do it again.

Wei Wuxian smiles sadly, but pinches A-Yuan’s cheek,

“Look at my little radish, such a kind little boy.”

Lan Jingyi is smiling too, looking like he’s feeling better now that he’s spoken his peace to the child version of his best friend.

“Okay, Wei-qianbei, I’m ready then.”

And then he takes a step back and opens his arms wide.

Wei Wuxian snorts,

“What are you doing?”

Lan Jingyi opens one of the eyes that he had closed in preparation,

“Waiting for you to do whatever you’re gonna do so that I can go home?”

Waiting for you to do whatever you’re gonna do .

Every single one of these kids is entirely too trusting.

“You trust your Wei-qianbei that much in the future?”

Lan Jingyi opens both his eyes so that he can look at Wei Wuxian confused.

He tips his head to side,

“Yea, I trust you. Past, present, and future?”

He finishes his answer like it’s a question, like he finds Wei Wuxian’s question to be dumb and thinks even giving a response is equally as dumb.

Like, *of course I trust you, you idiot.*

Wei Wuxian shakes his head with a smile,

“Alright, then. Close your eyes.”

He beckons Lan Jingyi back into his previous “preparation stance,” even if it’s completely unnecessary. Wei Wuxian feels himself smile the whole time, too.

And then he sends the fourth teenager of the day back home.

Chapter End Notes

Wei Wuxian, try not to call every teenager you meet ‘kid’ challenge, go!

—

Take a shot every time Wei Wuxian calls one of them kid.

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

I finished

Chapter Notes

First time the chapter count isn't a lie :D

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

When Lan Sizhui first opens his eyes, it's to see that he's sitting on the ground back in the original mountainous Gusu forest that he had started in.

He looks over to his left. He looks over to his right.

The resentful spirit is nowhere in sight. Coincidentally, his friends are also nowhere in sight.

Lan Sizhui should be really concerned. And he *is* . He *really* is *very* concerned.

But also, he can't help how he stares blankly at the ground. How he lets his vision blur and un-focus itself while his mind goes completely blank.

Lan Sizhui is supposed to be concerned. Lan Sizhui should stand up immediately, and start searching for his friends, for the resentful spirit, *for anything*.

Lan Sizhui doesn't. He only stays seated, staring numbly at nothing.

He doesn't know how long he sits like that, back curving like a shrimp as with every second his body seems to push itself down towards the earth.

He just doesn't know quite what to do. That's all.

But then, suddenly, he's not alone. Then there's Jin Ling, several paces further away, and blinking like he's confused.

Slowly, Lan Sizhui lifts his head,

“...Jin Ling,” he says, much too calm, much too dull for someone whose friend just appeared out of thin air.

It doesn’t matter. Sizhui has seen crazier.

Jin Ling, juxtaposing Sizhui’s calm, jerks violently at the sound of his name.

“Wha—!” He exclaims, looking around like a scared deer, before his eyes focus on Sizhui, “Sizhui?”

Sizhui nods.

“Sizhui!” Jin Ling yells, and then he’s rushing over.

The Lan has almost no time to prepare, before Jin Ling latches two arms around his waist and starts sobbing into Sizhui’s stomach.

“Sizhui!” He repeats, still crying his eyes out.

“Jin Ling...”

Sizhui’s arms are lifted up in shock. His eyes widened in awe. Jin Ling has never sought comfort in such a way before.

Usually, he pushes his emotions down, bottles them up, and then lets them burst out in the form of anger. This however... This is new.

Slowly, so as to not startle the other boy, Sizhui lets his arms relax and circle around him. One hand finds the other’s head, and strokes gently just as Wei Wuxian had done for him moments ago.

“Jin Ling.”

The boy’s cries turn harsher at the acknowledgment, a fresh wave of tears no doubt beginning.

“S—Sizhui—” He hiccups back.

And that’s all they need to say to understand. Apparently, Lan Sizhui is realizing at this moment, Jin Ling must have also traveled to the past.

“Who’d you see?” He asks gently, still petting a soothing hand on Jin Ling’s head.

Another sob bursts out of the boy,

“My mom!”

Sizhui closes his eyes.

“She was my mom, Sizhui! She was—”

Jin Ling's words catch on a stuttering hiccup,

“ She was so nice! ”

Sizhui takes a deep breath through his nose.

“Yea... they always did say she was great.”

Jin Ling's new sob accompanies the tear that drops from Sizhui's own eye.

Sizhui's head tips into a bow, and more tears drip down his face.

He wants to say that Jin Ling is lucky to have met her. Wants to tell him that at least he now has one memory. But Sizhui knows that's just not true. He had been given the same opportunity after all. And he had deemed it too difficult.

Had thought parting would have been too painful.

Jin Ling is still sobbing just as hard as he was, and it looks like there's no immediate end in sight.

Sizhui closes his eyes and lets his tears continue to fall as well.

“You're okay,” he says, still gently patting the other's back.

They're gonna be okay.

“You're gonna be okay.”

— — — — —

Lan Wangji doesn't know why he's in Caiyi Town.

Well, that's not technically true. He's here because Wei Ying asked him to be.

What he doesn't know is why Wei Ying is in Caiyi Town.

Lan Wangji doesn't mind, however.

He would go anywhere Wei Ying asked, details unimportant, as long as Wei Ying would be there.

And the man is here. Seated at a table made for only two people, shoved into the deep corner of their pre-arranged meeting place, seemingly trying to keep his head down.

Lan Wangji stands in the doorway feeling off-kilter already.

There's no food on the table that Wei Wuxian sits at, so Lan Wangji immediately makes to fix that. Flagging down a staff member, he asks for the spiciest dishes only, and only then does he start to make his way towards the man who invited him here.

"Wei Ying," he says, hoping his voice doesn't give away how much he feels in the mere presence of the other man.

Wei Wuxian looks up, startled at the sound of his name, and blinks a couple of times,

"Lan Zhan," he breathes, and Lan Wangji crushes any and all feelings that hearing his name from Wei Wuxian's lips evokes.

Stiltedly, Lan Wangji sits.

"I am here."

For you, is the end of that sentence that he refuses to finish.

Wei Wuxian looks down seemingly embarrassed,

"Yea," he says, dragging the last syllable out in a guilty manner, "Sorry to drag you all the way out here, Lan Zhan..."

Lan Zhan shakes his head, feeling frantic,

"No," he says.

Wei Wuxian looks up.

When they make eye contact, Wei Wuxian tips his head to the side, clearly confused.

Lan Wangji coughs,

"Not far," he says before he looks away, feeling far too exposed just from saying that.

Wei Wuxian's mouth tips up at the words, however, so they have apparently done their job.

"Okay," he says, still smiling that small smile.

And then the worker from earlier clunks five dishes, all bright red, clumsily onto the table,

"Oops! Sorry!" She says a little loudly, "That wasn't graceful..."

Lan Wangji doesn't even glance over. His eyes stay watching Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian *does* look over at her. In fact, he smiles up at her, and Lan Wangji finds he must divert his gaze to prevent openly glaring at the innocent woman.

"Not a problem!" Wei Wuxian says, and then talks to her until she leaves.

Lan Wangji doesn't hear their conversation, no, Lan Wangji instead burns holes into the table the whole time.

"Lan Zhan!"

When he looks up, the worker is nowhere in sight, and Wei Wuxian's smile is directed at him now.

It feels like a balm soothing his frayed nerves.

Wei Wuxian is looking at him with something that's not normally in his eyes. It looks almost calculating, and Lan Wangji has to shove down any urges he feels to start squirming under it.

"You didn't have to get all of these for little, old me..." He's saying with that look in his eyes and that small smile still on his lips.

Lan Wangji doesn't know what to make of it, so instead he dips his head in acknowledgement.

Wei Wuxian laughs brightly, finding amusement in his response somehow,

"Well, I must thank the Second Young Master Lan's generosity."

And then the first thing he reaches for with his chopsticks is the spiciest looking pepper which he then ceremoniously places on Lan Wangji's plate.

Lan Wangji looks up, eyes slightly widened.

"For you," Wei Wuxian says, eyes closed with the width of his smile, "Only the best for Lan Zhan."

Lan Wangji thinks about how his tongue had felt like it was going to melt off last time he ate with Wei Wuxian. Thinks that this pepper now looks even spicier than the food from back then.

"Thank you," he says, bowing his head again and knowing he will treasure the portion Wei Wuxian gave him.

Wei Wuxian's smile, impossibly, grows bigger,

"No need to thank me, Lan Zhan!" He says brightly, before cheerily moving to make his own plate.

And Lan Wangji can't help his next words. It's like they slip out without any notice,

"You seem happy."

The hand reaching for the food pauses. Similarly, Wei Wuxian's facial expression has also frozen on his face.

Lan Wangji wants to slit his own throat,

“I mean—“ He starts, hoping to remedy what he has said, but Wei Wuxian cuts him off,

“I seem happy?” Wei Wuxian drops his hand to think for a moment, and then mumbles “I suppose I am, aren’t I?”

Lan Wangji swallows back words, and waits to let Wei Wuxian speak for himself before his own interjections.

“It must be because I’m with you.”

When he says it, he looks up and meets Lan Wangji’s eyes. He looks almost surprised at the conclusion he has landed on.

Lan Wangji does his best to remain absolutely still.

It must be because I’m with you , echoes around his head like a ball ricocheting in his skull.

And then, apparently realizing what he had just said, Wei Wuxian flushes a bright red and panics.

“Uh—!” He stutters loudly, “I mean, uhh—“

Lan Wangji remains alarmingly still throughout. It is a defense mechanism against expressing the shock that he feels.

Until this moment, he had thought the only emotion he brought Wei Wuxian was discomfort.

“I mean!” Wei Wuxian is shouting still, but with seemingly no words in mind, “I meant it must be the reason I came to see you! *That’s* what’s making me happy!”

Lan Wangji continues to stare silently, and Wei Wuxian continues to flounder,

“Just a second, Lan Zhan! Let me get this out of my bag.”

And then he’s diving towards the floor where a sack that Lan Wangji had previously not noticed sits.

He pulls the bag up so that it sits in his lap, and then suddenly with exceeding care, Wei Wuxian starts to pull out what looks like a white cloth.

Setting the bag back on the ground, Wei Wuxian cradles what appears to be a Lan’s outer robe.

Lan Wangji feels his eyebrows furrow in confusion. Once again, words slip out unbidden,

“Did I give you that the last time I saw you?”

He certainly doesn’t remember doing an act so forward, but Lan Wangji can admit that Wei Wuxian provokes him to do the strangest things he never imagined doing.

For some reason, his question makes Wei Wuxian throw his head back with a laugh,

“No, Lan Zhan,” he’s saying between laughs, and Lan Wangji feels his ears heat up. Had he just inadvertently confessed that he *would have* given Wei Wuxian his outer robe if only he had the opportunity to do so?

“So, then…” Lan Wangji says valiantly over the other’s laughter, “Where…?”

Genuinely, Lan Wangji has no idea how Wei Wuxian could have gotten his hands on a Lan’s outer robe.

Perhaps some rogue disciple had gone to the Burial Mounds? An assassination attempt perhaps?

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji starts again, feeling more anxious this time.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian laughs, “You’re not gonna believe where I got it.”

Lan Wangji’s eyebrows furrow again. What could be so unbelievable?

“But it’s my only proof for my next question, so… bare with me, okay?”

Lan Wangji nods firmly. Confused or not, he will fulfill any request of Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian searches his face with his eyes, looking for who only knows what.

Lan Wangji waits patiently.

“What, um,” Wei Wuxian taps an anxious finger against the table, “What do you think about my Demonic Cultivation?”

Lan Wangji tilts his head a minuscule amount to the side. He opens his mouth, but Wei Wuxian rushes to speak first,

“Or I guess, *I know* you hate it. I’m supposed to ask, uhm, *why* do you hate it?”

Lan Wangji blinks.

Hate?

He hates Demonic Cultivation?

Perhaps, he does. But Wei Ying’s Demonic Cultivation?

Lan Wangji opens his mouth again, and very genuinely, he’s not sure what is about to come out,

“Because,”

Wei Wuxian is looking at him. He’s pretending he’s too interested in the food in front of him, but he’s looking at Lan Wangji.

Intensely.

Because it is harmful.

“Because it harms you,” Lan Wangji says instead, thinking something closer to the truth will be a better response.

Wei Wuxian inhales sharply, but now that he’s admitted it, Lan Wangji cannot stop,

“I cannot stand to see you hurt. I fear Demonic Cultivation will cause your mind, body, and spirit harm.”

And that’s more than he probably should have said, but Wei Wuxian had asked *why* . Anything Wei Wuxian asks, he shall have.

The red noodles currently in Wei Wuxian’s hold drop unceremoniously back into his bowl.

Lan Wangji stares unblinkingly.

It will be fine. It is not as if he had confessed his undying love.

It is normal to be concerned for a friend’s well-being. Lan Wangji has not given his deeper feelings away. There is no way.

So, Lan Wangji feels at ease despite his confession.

That is until Wei Wuxian’s next words.

“Lan Zhan, be honest, do you want to marry me?”

Lan Wangji, for the first time since his younger years, gracelessly chokes on his own spit.

“Wei Ying!”

He feels more flustered than he has ever felt in his whole life.

Do you want to marry me? Is the new mantra spinning around his head, and effectively replacing the old one.

Wei Wuxian only dissolves into bright laughter,

“Wait, Lan Zhan, let me explain, yea?”

Lan Wangji immediately snaps his mouth shut.

If Wei Wuxian wants to explain, then Lan Wangji will listen.

Anything Wei Wuxian wants, Lan Wangji will give him.

No matter what.

“So, recently I met this boy...”

Lan Wangji nods. He doesn't understand how that could be relevant right now, *how that could lead to proposing marriage*, but he keeps his mouth sealed shut.

Wei Wuxian looks at him, a smile in his eyes,

“This boy was from the future and he gave me this Lan robe. He also told me a lot of helpful information...”

Lan Wangji swallows, uncertain if he should be believing what Wei Wuxian is saying, but at the same time also hanging on to every word the other says.

“Would you like to hear what he told me about you?”

— — — — —

“Did you hear? Apparently, the Jin's new Sect Leader is ordering mass renovations.”

“Really? Huh, I guess Jins never change then. He's just like every Sect Leader before him.”

“That's the thing, he's not re-doing any of the halls...”

“His own chambers, then?”

The gossipier shakes a frantic head from side to side.

“Perhaps the welcome gate?”

“All wrong! You all are never gonna guess what he's renovating.”

“Will you just tell us already?”

Other cries of curiosity fill the air, and it isn't until they've all calmed down that the original gossipier can finally give an answer—

“It's the kitchens.”

A noise of surprise ripples through the crowd.

“And next it will be his servants' quarters.

“I heard he stormed into a meeting with his advisors, and immediately started demanding that renovations start that second.”

“Really?”

“He said it was a long overdue oversight, and that their staff has been deserving of larger spaces for over 20 years now...”

Mutters of approval go up around the crowd.

“Well,” someone speaks up, not having expected that.

A few chuckles of agreement follow the person’s statement.

“Good for him then.”

— — — — —

Returning to the future for Ouyang Zizhen had not been a very big deal.

He hadn’t left anybody behind, not had he really learned a lot of new information.

Oh, he had given a lot of information, and he had had a good time. But leaving? Leaving didn’t really take a toll on him.

Ouyang Zizhen knows that the same cannot be said for his friend, Jin Ling.

Zizhen had been the third person to arrive back to their present timeline, and he had arrived back to the sight of Jin Ling openly sobbing into Lan Sizhui’s arms. Over their youngest friend’s head, Zizhen had made eye contact with Sizhui who also had tears streaming down his face.

Upon eye contact, the other boy only tipped his head down solemnly.

Ouyang Zizhen then stood silently, and waited for their friend to cry it all out. Tipped his own head downwards, and let a few tears drip to the forest floor as well.

The sound of Jin Ling’s gut-wrenching sobs was the only thing penetrating the silence. It was also what greeted Lan Jingyi when he finally appeared on the scene.

It wasn’t exactly hard to figure out what had upset Jin Ling.

Standing there, knowing Jin Ling had met his mother, had given her the name Zizhen, and had then left only to have his cover blown by Ouyang Zizhen’s mere existence... well.

The guilt ate him alive.

The guilt ate him all the way until several weeks later. Weeks after Wei-qianbei had explained to them that he and Hanguang-jun had defeated the original spirit for them. Weeks after Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi had opened up about their own experience in the past. For weeks, this guilt continued to eat at Ouyang Zizhen.

It is the reason he hasn't yet told anyone what he had done in the past—Who he had met or what they had said.

Jin Ling also hasn't divulged that information. The wound must still be too raw for him to go poking at it.

No one has pushed either of them to start talking.

In fact, when Lan Jingyi had shared his story immediately after Lan Sizhui shared his, Wei-qianbei had turned an expectant eye onto Zizhen next. But when all he did was give a small head shake, everyone moved on with grace.

No one had pressed him for more information since.

And the guilt in his stomach surges every time he thinks about it.

So now, Ouyang Zizhen finds himself at the only place that can absolve him of this. He stands at the entrance to Koi Tower.

The people at the gate open the door for him despite him not having announced his visit ahead of time. It would seem that Jin Ling has given Ouyang Zizhen explicit permission to come to Koi Tower unannounced at any time.

This simultaneously fills him up with warmth and makes the guilt turn over in his gut. It is with his stomach tying itself into knots that he walks across the threshold into Jin Ling's home.

Jin Ling meets him in the greeting room, his servants no doubt having alerted him of his arrival.

His arms are crossed, and there's confusion in his eyebrows, but his mouth is smiling when he says,

“Zizhen? What are you doing here, huh?”

Ouyang Zizhen feels his mouth smile even though his limbs feel like lead,

“Jin Ling,” he says, hoping the nervousness hasn't found its way into his voice.

If he notices it, Jin Ling doesn't remark on it. Instead, he turns and motions a hand for Zizhen to follow,

“Here, come with me. It's too early for dinner, but we can go have some tea.”

Ouyang Zizhen follows, feeling like a lost puppy following its owner.

He doesn't come to Koi Tower very often, and when he does, Jin Ling keeps him in the same general area. Quickly, however, Zizhen realizes that they are diverging from that standard today.

Falling into step with Jin Ling, Ouyang Zizhen finds himself walking in halls and corridors he has never once been privy to.

"Where are we going?"

Jin Ling looks over, and there's something in his eyes that feels... melancholic?

"Somewhere I've found myself appreciating lately."

And then he elaborates no further.

Ouyang Zizhen's instinct would be to push for more information, however that seems like it would be a bad idea right now.

So, he doesn't.

Instead, he just allows himself to be led.

When they do finally make it to their destination, it's the kitchen that Jin Ling has chosen to take him to.

"...I thought you said we were gonna have tea?"

In his mind, Ouyang Zizhen had pictured a breezy pavilion that the two of them could sit at and drink their tea. Or perhaps even just a cozy little room.

The kitchen is the last place he had expected to be taken to.

Jin Ling, however, is already reaching for the tea kettle sitting over the fire stove,

"Yes?" He says looking back at Zizhen with furrowed brows.

"You're gonna make the tea?"

"Of course," Jin Ling scoffs, as if this is only to be expected, "I know how to cook."

It takes everything within Ouyang Zizhen to resist pointing out that making tea is definitely not cooking.

"Okay," he says instead, and then takes a seat at the countertop.

So, Jin Ling starts to make the tea.

He's very cautious about all of it. Takes his time carefully measuring out all the water, all the tea leaves, and then he mixes them very meticulously.

When he carries the pot over to the stove, it is as if he believes that the water sloshing will ruin the tea. To prevent this, he walks at a snail's

very careful pace.

Ouyang Zizhen sits and watches his friend, thoroughly confused.

“So, you like hanging out in the kitchen? I didn't know that.”

Jin Ling never once takes his eyes off of the tea kettle that he's now ever so carefully placing on the stove,

“Yes.”

Ouyang Zizhen purses his lips and nods. He had wanted more details but, you know, he'll take what he can get.

“I'm renovating it soon.”

Ouyang Zizhen cuts a glance over at his friend,

“Yea?” He pushes a little.

“It needs to be bigger.”

Ouyang Zizhen still feels immensely confused. All of this is nowhere near normal behavior for Jin Ling, but before he can open his mouth, Jin Ling is continuing,

“It needs to be bigger, but I like this version of the kitchen, too, so, I'm trying to spend a lot of time here before it gets changed.”

“How long until the renovations start?”

“Two more weeks.”

Ouyang Zizhen lets out a low whistle,

“That's pretty fast.”

As a Sect Heir, he is more than aware about how much time change requires. Particularly, change that takes a lot of man power such as renovations.

Finally, taking his attention off of the tea kettle, Jin Ling turns and says,

“Yea, well, it needs to be done as soon as possible.”

And then, the two of them fall into silence.

Jin Ling refuses to move away from the stove now that he's tending to the tea. Ouyang Zizhen continues to sit awkwardly at the counter top.

Eventually, Jin Ling does finish the tea in silence.

Everything he does to prepare it is done with just as much caution as he had used while making it.

“...”

A teacup is placed in front of Zizhen’s hands. Placed there by his friend who had so painstakingly made it for him.

And Ouyang Zizhen simply cannot withstand the guilt any further.

Before Jin Ling can even sit down, Zizhen is opening his mouth and spilling,

“I accidentally blew your cover!”

After the words are blurted out, he can feel his shoulders actually slump with the relief of having let it out.

Jin Ling looks startled at the sudden confession. The stool he had been pulling out is now stopped halfway from completing the action.

The only thing that is audible in that moment is Zizhen’s slightly heavier than normal breathing.

“Okay...” Jin Ling says hesitantly, before resuming pulling out the stool.

Lightly, he sits down in it, “What are you talking about?”

Now that they’re seated across from each other, Ouyang Zizhen can look his friend directly in the eye for the first time since arriving.

His gut still churns, but confession has lessened the tidal wave, so Zizhen musters the strength to continue,

“When we were all stuck in the past, I accidentally blew your cover.”

At the mention of the past, Jin Ling’s eyes widen.

It is something the two of them have refused to speak on for the past couple weeks, and this is probably the first time someone has directly brought it up to Jin Ling.

“...What did you do?” The other asks, still confused, but not openly refusing to talk about the past.

Ouyang Zizhen supposes that’s a good sign that he can continue,

“I met your mom—”

Jin Ling inhales sharply.

“—and I know you met her, too. I know you used my name as a fake name. I know you didn’t tell her who you were, and-and-and I gave her my name without even thinking! And so, she definitely... uhm, maybe, for sure knew who you were.”

Ouyang Zizhen had promised himself he wouldn’t cry during his confession, so now that he feels tears forming, his only solution is to throw his hands over his eyes to make them stop.

“I’m so sorry, Jin Ling.”

Because his hands are over his eyes, it is impossible to see his friend’s reaction to the news.

It somehow makes the silence both unbearable and better.

Finally, *finally*, Jin Ling whispers quietly,

“...She knew who I was?”

Still trying to hold back tears, Zizhen nods shakily.

“Was,” Jin Ling pauses, and Zizhen can’t see, but it sounds pained, “Was she surprised?”

Ouyang Zizhen remembers the way Wei Wuxian had collapsed into laughter just at the mention of the name ‘Zizhen.’

Also, more importantly, he remembers the way Jin Ling’s mom had approached him. Had first made him lift his sad gaze off of the ground before saying, *I feel like a part of me knew from the moment I met him.*

“No,” Ouyang Zizhen lowers his hands, and looks down at the table, “No, she said she already knew.”

He’s still looking down at the table when he hears the first sob.

Alarmed, Zizhen snaps his head up.

Jin Ling, seated across from him still, now has *his* hand covering both of his eyes,

“ *She knew?* ”

Ouyang Zizhen’s alarm turns into a sad sense of understanding,

“Yea, she and, uh, Wei Wuxian both already knew.”

Jin Ling lets out another sob, and ever so lightly, Zizhen reaches out a hand. Places it over the hand Jin Ling has resting on the table between them.

“She knew that whole time, and she— *she still said all of those things?* ”

Zizhen doesn’t quite know what Jiang Yanli was saying to Jin Ling, but he’s sure he could make an educated guess at this point.

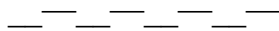
“Yea,” Zizhen says softly, patting Jin Ling’s hand, “She really does love you, huh?”

Jin Ling drops his head into his arms and lets his shoulders shake with his sobs.

Ouyang Zizhen finds he is also crying, but it’s true—From everything he heard from the woman herself, Jiang Yanli really did love her son.

She always has, always will.

The only thing that’s different is that her son knows it now, too.



Nie Huaisang doesn’t know why Sect Leader Jiang is requesting his presence at Lotus Pier.

Nobody ever requests his presence anywhere.

He wasn’t exactly useful during the war, and honestly he’s not exactly useful right now. Instead, he lives in a shadow that belongs to his older brother.

His older brother takes all the hits for him, does all the work for him, and lets Huaisang live the artistic life of his dreams.

It’s perfectly ideal.

Nobody calls on him during moments of crises. Nobody expects him to be able to offer aid. And *nobody* summons his presence with the authority of a Sect Leader.

The only reason that Huaisang can think of for why Sect Leader Jiang might be requesting his presence would be perhaps to catch up for old times sake. Or maybe even in an effort to stage an intervention for their friend, Wei Wuxian’s, new cultivation style.

Besides those two reasons, Huaisang can think of no other explanation.

Because of this, he has planned accordingly.

He has packed art supplies, alcohol, extra fans, and even his one and only fishing pole that he has never used.

When he arrives, it becomes abundantly clear that he had the wrong impression of the stay’s plans.

Jiang Cheng is there, of course, but so is Jin Zixuan, Jiang Yanli, Wen Qing, Hanguang-jun and Wei Wuxian.

Walking into the welcoming hall and seeing all of their faces, well, Nie Huaisang desperately tries to keep the disappointment off of his face.

“Sect Leader Jiang,” He decides to address first. Dropping into one of his most formal bows, “This one is here replying to your summons. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Jiang Cheng scoffs. Loudly.

“Stop it, Nie-xiong. No formalities.”

Nie Huaisang rises, a bright grin on his face,

“And even Wei-xiong is here! This truly must be a special occasion.”

Wei Wuxian, to his credit, laughs brightly and says,

“Is the announcement of my engagement not special enough?”

Nie Huaisang feels his eyebrows leap upwards.

Perhaps the alcohol would still be in theme for his stay here.

“Engagement? To whom?”

He lets his eyes roam across everyone in the room, and sees if he can pick an obvious candidate. There’s no immediate answer.

“It can’t be that you intend to marry Wen-guniang?”

Wen Qing herself scoffs at the idea.

“What? No! *Nie-xiong*,” and when Wei Wuxian says his name it’s almost like a playful reprimand. As if he should know already who it might be.

“To Lan Zhan of course!”

Nie Huaisang feels his eyebrows tick up another few inches,

“To Hanguang-jun?” He asks in Lan Wangji’s direction. Needing confirmation that this isn’t a weird joke.

“Mm,” is the only response.

“Nie-gongzi,” Jin Zixuan is now speaking up for the first time. The difference between how he calls him and how the others had is stark,

“Perhaps we should talk more in a private area.”

Nie Huaisang looks at him.

“We have much to discuss with you.”

Lan Jingyi, once again, finds himself in the Burial Mounds.

This, plus the first time, plus the recent trip to the past, makes his total trips up the Burial Mounds three whole times.

Something that hadn't been at the forefront of his mind the first two times, but is definitely there now, is that actually the hike up is kind of exhausting.

It's steep and littered with bones you have to avoid. Not to mention the time it actually takes to reach the summit. Any other day, Lan Jingyi would have flown to the top on his sword.

But today... Well, today he wants to do things the proper way.

And so, huffing and puffing, Lan Jingyi slowly makes his way up the Burial Mounds. *The hard way.*

He is alone this time, that is also something he's never done before.

Not even Wei-qianbei accompanies him now. Not even Sizhui.

Lan Jingyi is not particularly used to being alone. It's been quite a while since he has been. Most night hunts he has his friends, and Cloud Recesses is never lacking in people.

The silence now gives him moments to reflect.

Almost like meditating, but with physical exercise involved as well.

The mountain continues to be silent even when he makes it to the old Burial Mounds settlement near the top. The only noise breaking the silence is Jingyi's intense breathing.

“Wow,” he breathes, running out of air, “the Wens were strong for making that hike.”

And then he thinks of Wei Wuxian who also made that climb without a golden core, and he adds on,

“Wei-qianbei, too, I suppose.”

Nobody answers him.

Huffing a few more times, Lan Jingyi takes a moment to look around with his hands raised over his head to promote better breathing.

It looks exactly the same as when he had left it weeks ago.

In fact, it is hard to tell if he is just placing things where he thinks they should be, but that burnt out fire pit looks an awful lot like the very one he had gathered around with the Wens.

Lan Jingyi turns again, and sees the Demon Slaughtering Cave to his right.

Exactly where it was the first two times he was here.

Breathing returned to normal now, Lan Jingyi pauses only a little before making his way over to the cave. When he crosses the threshold, it's almost as if he can feel the energy shift.

It's a little spooky.

The blood pool is still there, looking just as it did last time. Wei Wuxian's stuff, looted through from the first siege of the Burial Mounds, remains just as pitiful as it was before.

The only new addition is what rests right next to the blood pool.

A shrine, a pale imitation of the ancestral shrines in the homes of the Great Sects, now stands tall. The only new addition to the Burial Mounds for over 20 years.

On it rests plates for each Wen that resided here. Each one that was killed here. Each one that was tossed into the blood pool here.

Lan Jingyi's breath catches a little in his throat.

"Hi," he whispers without having meant to.

It is outstanding the amount of effort Lan Sizhui, Wen Ning, and Wei Wuxian had been able to put into this shrine.

Surrounding the altar are candles clearly made from one of the highest of craftsmen. Each plate lacks even a speck of dust.

It is a simple shrine, yes, but it still punches Jingyi in the gut a little bit to see.

"I brought you guys something as a thank you for, well, hosting me."

Lan Jingyi reaches into the bag he had carried on his shoulder all the way here. From it, he pulls some oranges and apples, along with a jar of Emperor's Smile.

"I know it's a little late for this thank you, but..."

Gently, Jingyi places the fruit onto the offering plate that was so very clearly stolen from the Gusu Lan kitchens.

“Lans don’t drink, but Wei-qianbei really liked this alcohol. I thought maybe you guys would like it, too.”

The next thing he pulls out is the incense he had brought with him.

Silently, he lights first all of the candles surrounding the shrine, before also lighting his own incense.

Holding it in his hands, he bows three times. As low and as respectful as he can. Only then does he place the incense in the holder.

By the end of the process, Jingyi can feel his throat is a little tight.

“I—“

He starts, but breaks off.

Taking a deep breath, Jingyi struggles through continuing,

“I think you guys must have been really cool.”

Jingyi looks up towards the ceiling,

“I didn’t even get to meet all of you, but you all accepted me into your home. Gave me your food. Let me dote on your A-Yuan.

“I just—“

Lan Jingyi doesn’t know what he wants to say, but lets his mouth run as he usually does,

“—I am just really grateful to you all. It sucks that you guys had to die.”

And then because he can hear Wen Qing reprimanding him in his mind, Lan Jingyi amends his statement,

“I guess what I mean is, I wish you were still here. I’m sorry you all had such a rotten ending.

“You didn’t deserve that.”

Jingyi drops his head.

They hadn’t deserved the ending that they got.

Lan Jingyi’s throat becomes too tight to keep talking, so instead he falls silent.

It’s okay, however. He’s said everything he came here to say.

So, on his knees, head bowed still, Lan Jingyi stays there until the incense sticks burn out.

When they do, he silently stands and collects himself. Then he reaches into his bag and pulls out one more thing.

It's a drum rattle that Sizhui had given to him when they were kids.

"I, uhm, know Sizhui visits you guys a lot, but I wanted to also give you this piece of him."

Jingyi swallows hard,

"You never got to see him graduate from the paper butterfly phase into the drum rattle phase, so..."

"I just thought maybe you guys would like it."

And then, bowing lowly one more time, Lan Jingyi prepares to leave.

When he stands up straight, he's still feeling sad, but he puts on a fake smile for the Wens,

"Next time I come back, I'll bring you something else of Sizhui's, okay?"

There's no response, but Jingyi feels his smile turn a little more real.

"I'll see you soon!"

And then, heavy-heartedly, he's leaving the cave. Waving vigorously behind him as he goes.

— — — —

When Jin Zixuan had said they had a lot to discuss with him, he had not been joking.

Nie Huaisang realizes that now.

The story they recounted was fantastical, completely unbelievable, and yet...

"Oh wow..." He says out loud.

Jin Zixuan had been the one to recount the story of their potential future. Both because of his ability to stay on topic, and also because he had been the one to actually be given the information.

"And they told you to come find *me*?"

Jin Zixuan nods, but Wei Wuxian pipes up,

"Yes, but why would they do that, *Nie-xiong*?"

The way he says it, it feels like an interrogation. So, Nie Huaisang does what he does best.

He puts on a show.

Clumsily, he lets his legs give out so that he can fall to the floor dramatically.

Jiang Yanli, ever caring, rushes forward to check his forehead. “Nie-gongzi!” She cries as she kneels down next to him.

Pretending as if he is too zoned out to notice her, Nie Huaisang prepares to start wailing,

“I don’t know...” He says distraught, while shaking his head back and forth, “I really don’t know why they would want me to know!”

Wei Wuxian lifts a brow, but the others look only annoyed with him. Jiang Cheng even has the nerve to burst out an impassioned, “Useless!”

Nie Huaisang snaps a fan open. Looking delicately around, he flutters it so as to appear flustered.

“Well,” Wei Wuxian claps his hands together, “he says he doesn’t know!”

Everyone in the room looks over at him as if he has grown another head.

“Wei Wuxian,” Jiang Cheng growls, “Does your nonchalant attitude seem funny right now?”

“What? I’m just saying the man doesn’t know?”

And then Wei Wuxian rounds on Nie Huaisang so fast that it makes a rabbit look slow,

“So, I’ll ask a different question. What do you think of my engagement news?”

Nie Huaisang blinks up at the other from his position on the floor still. Wei Wuxian grins brightly down at him.

“A-Xian...” Jiang Yanli is saying, still kneeling beside him, but she goes ignored.

“Your engagement?” Nie Huaisang says confused.

“Mm, mm! What do you think about it?”

Wei Wuxian opens his eyes now to meet Nie Huaisang’s dead on.

The smile is still on his face, but not in his eyes.

Wei Wuxian means *business* .

Nie Huaisang swallows hard.

Wei Wuxian has always known him. Has known him at the Cloud Recesses, and at Lotus Pier. In youth, and in war.

Wei Wuxian knows exactly what Nie Huaisang is capable of, and he knows that Huaisang knows this too—

—If the kids from the future had told them all to find him, it is clear then that Huaisang is some kind of turning stone in their favor.

And the only skill he has is lying. Playing the game, and trapping others.

Wei Wuxian knows all of this, and so Huaisang does his old friend the dignity of actually thinking about what his question means.

What do you think of my engagement news?

Him asking that means that their motivation behind marriage is not simply love.

It's a move. A piece moved across the board.

The Yiling Patriarch marries the Second Jade of Lan, and suddenly he is untouchable.

The Wens he is working so hard to protect will be then taken under the Gusu Lan's wing through a marriage contract. If it were any other sect, the move would seem political. Strategic. Snake-like. But this is Gusu Lan.

This is the Second Jade of Lan.

The world will see it as the taming of a beast. And the only person they trust to do it would be a Lan.

The Wens will be revealed by Gusu Lan as only innocent bystanders to a war they did not participate in. Jin Guangyao and his father will be

exposed for having lied to all the other sects. The odds that they are able to play it off are high, but still.

Scrutiny is scrutiny.

The Jin's plan that was so thoroughly laid out by the children from the future will be completely ruined in one fell swoop.

What does Nie Huaisang think of their marriage?

“Why, Wei-xiong, I-I really don't know. I think if you think you're making the right choice in Hanguang-jun, then I support you. But really, I'm no matchmaker, I truly don't know.”

He thinks their marriage is one of the best moves they can make.

It should incapacitate the Jin completely and utterly, but just in case it doesn't, just in case Jin Guangyao once again does tries to kill his brother, Nie Huaisang will be ready.

Already, Nie Huaisang is thinking of ways to break their sworn brotherhood.

He's got three ideas for starters.

With this kind of advanced notice, how could Huaisang possibly lose?

No, he refuses to let the events described to him come to pass.

He simply will not allow it.

Wei Wuxian's smile grows.

"If my old pal Nie-xiong thinks it's a good idea, then it must be!" He's saying, all false cheer and happy clapping.

Before he stands, however, Wei Wuxian looks Nie Huaisang in the eye one more time.

The smile on his face is smaller now, more genuine.

Nie Huaisang has no idea what the other might say, but he braces himself for anything.

"Thank you, Nie-xiong," he says intently, "Your guidance is much appreciated."

The breath Huaisang had been holding releases itself slowly,

"Of course, Wei-xiong," he says.

You know I could never let my brother die.

"Anything for an old friend."

- _ - _ - _ - _ -

Jin Ling has been working in the kitchen all day long.

From the moment he woke up, to now, late afternoon, Jin Ling has been working in the kitchen.

For more clarity, he has been working on only one meal in particular.

It has taken him three months after the time traveling event to work up the courage to make what he's decided to make today.

To make a recipe lost to the cruelties of war.

In those three months of courage building, Jin Ling has been working on his cooking skills. Everytime he uses a knife, everytime he slices a carrot, he feels inexplicably closer to her. To Jiang Yanli.

To his mother.

He can still hear her words of encouragement ringing in his ears when he successfully finishes a task in the kitchen.

Any mother would be proud to have a son like you.

Knowing now that she knew it was him the whole time makes the warm feeling in his stomach glow just a little bit brighter.

Makes him want to be a son deserving of such compliments.

Now, big renovations and three months later, Jin Ling finally feels confident enough to replicate the soup he had personally been taught how to make by his own mother.

A soup that no one has been able to replicate since she died.

To this day, Jin Ling has still not openly told anyone what happened to him while he was in the past. Ouyang Zizhen probably caught a little of it from the time he had confessed to blowing Jin Ling's cover. But even then, Jin Ling had not divulged much.

Today, he feels ready.

Ready to make this soup. Ready to share some stories.

So, he invited his two Uncles over today.

Both agreed to come, but neither knows of the other's invite. Jin Ling knows that if they did, they might both have bailed.

Is it a lie if it has good intentions? Who knows.

It is with this in mind that he walks into the pavilion overlooking the lotus pond his father had planted for his mother.

Seated in two seats very far away from each other are his two uncles.

Surprisingly, they are actually talking.

"So," Wei Wuxian is speaking up, "we found out that Lan Sizhui was the initial person to inhale the resentful energy, right?"

Wei Wuxian is nervously tapping his foot against the wooden floor. He also is speaking at a rate so fast that it could only speak to inherent nerves.

Jiang Cheng is perhaps the opposite. He sits as still as a statue, eyes only moving to cut judgemental side eyes over at the other man in the pavilion.

Nevertheless, he grunts to show acknowledgment of Wei Wuxian's statement.

“Well, the spirit had never sent multiple people at once to the past. Only one person at a time for this spirit.

“And because inhaling the resentful spirit was supposed to send you to the past to meet people significant to *you*, the spirit ended up sending *all four of them* to people that were significant to *Sizhui*. Does that make sense?”

“No.”

Wei Wuxian's foot stops tapping, and a flash of hurt flies across his face,

“I—“

“What does significant mean? How are Jin Zixuan and-and—“ Jiang Cheng cuts himself off to glare furiously at the ground.

Jin Ling frowns.

Still, his Jiujiu cannot utter his mom's name.

Deciding that enough is enough, Jin Ling steps into the pavilion and loudly declares his presence,

“Because they're family to Sizhui, of course. His Aunt and his Uncle.”

And as he says it, he strides confidently over to the table onto which he lightly places the tray he brought with him.

Wei Wuxian blinks at him in surprise,

“A-Ling...” he breathes, and Jin Ling scoffs.

“Don't call me that.”

“Jin Ling,” Jiang Cheng says, anger in his voice trying desperately to veil the surprise.

Jin Ling ignores that, too, and instead turns his nose up to talk down to both of them,

“Look at you two, always fighting. Don't you ever get tired of it?”

He crosses his arms a little haughtily—he can admit that—but neither of his Uncle's call him on it.

“Now, I suppose you're both wondering why I brought you here today.”

“Well—“

Jin Ling cuts Wei Wuxian off,

“Well, you’re gonna find out. Here.”

And then a little aggressively, Jin Ling sits and starts to reach for the tray he had put down earlier.

He unscrews the lid off the container of soup, before unceremoniously placing a bowl in front of each Uncle.

Both of them blink in surprise, but otherwise stay silent.

Taking a deep breath, Jin Ling ladles the first portion out into Jiang Cheng’s bowl.

A shaky gasp is taken from both men.

“Jin Ling—“

“Shut up,” he says lightly, “Shut up, and eat the soup.”

Once two portions are doled out to the two men, Jin Ling sits back into his chair.

“Well?” He questions when he sees neither has moved an inch, “Aren’t you going to try it?”

Wei Wuxian has tears in his eyes already, and he hasn’t even tried the soup yet,

“Jin Ling... *How...?* ”

Jin Ling looks away, feeling his cheeks burn from the attention,

“You don’t even know if it’s good yet. Try it.” He demands for the third time now.

Really, it’s like working with idiots with these two.

Jiang Cheng tries it first. Had already put a spoonful into his mouth while Wei Wuxian had been trying to get answers out of Jin Ling.

The other two realize he’s already tried it when they hear a punched out sound come from his direction.

Looking over at him, he has placed a hand over his mouth, and his eyes are closed.

Jin Ling feels his armpits start to sweat a little,

“Jiujiu?” He asks, “Was it not right?”

Jiang Cheng only shakes his head violently, but doesn’t remove the hand from his mouth or open his eyes.

His face looks pained.

“Wait, Da-jiu, you don’t have to—“

Jin Ling turns frantically towards Wei Wuxian, but finds that number 1. The man has already tried the soup, and number 2. There are two tear tracks streaming down both his cheeks.

“Da-jiu!” He cries, a little alarmed.

“Jin Ling,” He says back through a watery smile,

“How did you possibly make this?”

Jin Ling feels his panic grow even more,

“What? What’s wrong?” He demands, feeling defensive, “It’s not good, is it!”

Wei Wuxian laughs and this causes more tears to drip down his face,

“Oh, A-Ling...”

“It’s perfect,” Jiang Cheng finally speaks up.

His hand is still covering his mouth, but now it looks more like an attempt to hold back tears rather than vomit.

“It’s absolutely perfect, A-Ling,” Wei Wuxian says, somehow both crying and laughing.

“Oh.”

It’s perfect, apparently.

Jin Ling feels the desperate feeling in his stomach settle into something calmer.

“Oh,” he repeats, this time lighter.

It’s perfect.

He made his mother’s soup to perfection. He learned something from his mother.

A smile spreads across his face,

“Well, that’s good to know.”

Wei Wuxian lets out a sound that sounds both like a sob and a laugh,

“You gonna explain this to us, kid? Or is this just gonna have to be another mystery in our lives?”

Jiang Cheng scoffs, but honestly, Jin Ling thinks it sounds more like a laugh.

It’s something.

Jin Ling relaxes back into his chair and takes a deep breath.

He feels ready to talk about her.

“She taught me herself.”

Nobody speaks, and nobody moves a muscle. It’s like the whole world is hanging on to Jin Ling’s next words,

“My mom did. My mom taught me how to make this soup three months ago.”

Chapter End Notes

Everyone seeing that Wei Wuxian is wearing a Lan outer robe: Wait, did Hanguang-jun give you that?

Wei Wuxian: Oh my god, no!

Lan Wangji seeing that Wei Wuxian is wearing a Lan outer robe: Wait, did I give you that?

— — —

Anyway, I finished the fic!

If you made it this far, I must commend your courage and thank you sincerely.

I spent forever trying to make this ending absolutely perfect so, I hope you all like it. Here are a few ends that might need to be tied—

Yes, LWJ and WWX are getting married in the new timeline, and while it is strategic, it is also romantic. They’re obviously in love.

Their marriage does indeed fix everything... and also no one trusting Jin Guangyao anymore helps.

Bam, fix it. Sort of.

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